

How can Matsuyama Maintain Vitality with a Declining Population?

The Matsuyama Chamber of Commerce and Industry has formulated a "City Development Vision 2026," which outlines how Matsuyama will maintain vitality with a declining population. Using the term "steady state," the vision outlines three directions to be pursued over the next 30 years.

Mr. Kenji Miyoshi, the chairman of the chamber of commerce and the president of Iyo Bank, made the announcement. The report was compiled over three years starting in 2023, in cooperation with professors from Waseda University and in the study of surveys of other cities.

The population of Matsuyama was approximately 300,000 in 1970 and reached 500,000 in 2005. However, looking at the future, it is expected that only Tokyo's population will increase nationwide, while other municipalities will experience a drastic population decline.

The plan outlines three points: "Establish a stable population of around 300,000 and function as a core city in Shikoku," "Focus on growth industries to maintain the current city's GDP of 1.7 trillion yen," and "Achieve an annual income of 20 million yen for a model household consisting of grandparents, parents, and two children."

How can the city maintain its GDP among a declining population? The vision identifies tourism and agriculture as industries with growth potential.

In terms of tourism, the services and infrastructure are well developed in Matsuyama with numerous historical and cultural resources. In 2024, the number of foreign tourists reached the highest to date.

In agriculture, not only in Matsuyama but throughout the prefecture, there are many products which are highly appreciated on the global market, and it is expected that selling local products outside the region will bring a significantly positive impact to the local economy.

Chairman Mr. Miyoshi stated, "We need to introduce and make full use of DX and AI. We want to tackle this not only at the national level but also at the local level."

(April 16, Asahi Shimbun Digital)

Website Providing Information on the Shikoku Pilgrimage for foreigners

A website called "OHENRO.ONLINE" (<https://ohenro.online/>) was launched in eight languages including Japanese on April 15 to offer practical information for the Shikoku Pilgrimage for foreign pilgrims, including introductions to the 88 temples, etiquette, and methods of worship,. The site features interviews with the head priests of approximately 40 temples in Shikoku, including Daihoji and Iwayaji temples in Kumakogen, and also includes videos utilizing AI technology.

The project was produced by a committee of three companies, including the Kokoro Travel Agency, which is working to revive pilgrim lodgings. The project began through

connections with a Tokyo-based company that develops multilingual video translation services by AI. Among the languages offered are English, French, German, and Chinese. Registration is free.

"Pilgrimage information is available only in Japanese," and "It's difficult to understand the cultural background and customs" These were the challenges identified through interviews with foreigners who had experienced the Shikoku pilgrimage, and the project aims to resolve them. Involvement of local priests and guides in experimental filming also provided a significant addition to the project.

The committee stated, "We would like to propose a new style of pilgrimage tourism that goes beyond simply promoting inbound tourism and involves understanding and empathy for the region and its culture."

(April 15, Ehime Shimbun Online)

To Help the People in Southeast Asia

On April 10, two young men from Toon City, who will be working in Southeast Asia as JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency) Overseas Cooperation Volunteers, visited the prefectural office and spoke to Vice Governor, Noriyuki Kan, about their aspirations.

Keita Fujioka, aged 35, who runs a coffee shop, will be dispatched to East Timor to an NGO that supports coffee production. Yuya Watanabe, aged 33, will teach basic computer operations and handle maintenance at a vocational training school in Cambodia.

Mr. Fujioka explained that East Timor is a major coffee-producing country and the government is promoting it. He said, "I would like to work closely with producers and find ways to help plan tourist projects."

According to Mr. Watanabe, while smartphones are widely used in Cambodia, many people lack basic computer skills. He expressed his enthusiasm, saying, "I would like to understand what people need and work for their sake."

Vice Governor presented the two with letters of appointment as Ehime Overseas Cooperation Ambassadors. Mr. Fujioka will depart on April 14, and Mr. Watanabe on April 28. Both their assignments will be for two years. (April 11, Ehime Shimbun)

Warm Welcome Back, Peace

On April 7, Peace the Polar Bear, a 26-year-old female polar bear at Tobe Zoo, came back to the public, after her disappearance had been suspected to be due to poor health. When Peace turned up in good health for the first time in 12 days, fans who had been eagerly waiting for her recovery expressed their relief.

On March 25, Peace began showing signs of ill health, including a decreased appetite and difficulty standing, and from March 27 she had been receiving treatment in the backyard. The cause was inflammation due to a bacterial infection in a wound on her right

front leg. On March 30, she underwent surgery under general anesthesia to clean and suture the wound. As the wound healed, she regained her appetite.

On the day of her comeback, she showed good spirits, playing in the pool and walking around the enclosure. One visitor said, "I am so happy that she has recovered safely. I hope she lives a long life."

The average lifespan of a polar bear is said to be 25 to 30 years. Peace has suffered from epilepsy since she was three years old and has overcome life-threatening conditions many times. Mr. Takaichi, a zookeeper who has been in charge of taking care of Peace, is grateful for the messages he received from her fans from inside and outside of the prefecture. He said, "She is elderly, and when she fell ill, the worst scenario in these 26 years crossed my mind. I was encouraged by her strong will to live and her fans' passion. I want to continue walking together at her pace." (April 8, Ehime Shimbun)

(Peace is the first polar bear in Japan to be successfully raised by humans after her mother failed to raise her.)

Matsuyama City Fire Department Focuses on Recruiting Young People

The Matsuyama City Fire Department is putting much effort on recruiting high school and university students. In recent years, the number of applicants for firefighting positions has been declining, and the challenge has become to secure young talent. Through an internship program which provides participants with work experience, the goal is to promote understanding of firefighting work and encourage students to consider it as a career option.

On March 14, a "One-Day Internship" was held at the Matsuyama City Central Fire Station. Ms. Yurika Tadaki, a second-year student at Toon High School, clad in a fire-resistant suit, experienced spraying water while holding a fire hose with both hands. She was surprised that they went to fire scenes in such heavy clothing.

It was the second one-day internship program since starting last March. 22 students, including four girls, from within and outside the prefecture participated. They toured the station's command and control center and experienced training exercises such as hoisting a person in need of rescue with a rope and rescuing someone trapped in smoke. Of the 38 participants last year, 30 applied for the employment exam.

According to the fire department, the number of applicants for the recruitment exam has been declining since 2004, and had fallen to 83 in 2025, which was about a quarter of the peak.

Although there are certain number of young people who have aimed to be a firefighter since their childhood, the fire department is concerned that young people have little understanding of firefighting work, and they need to help them see it as a career option.

A new brochure promoting recruitment was developed in February this year. The design

features large photos of a man and woman asking "Me, a firefighter?". The brochure introduces not only the people on site, but also the work of the command and control center and the prevention department investigating the cause of a fire.

The low number of female applicants is also a concern. Of the applicants in fiscal year 2013, only six were women, with only eight in 2016. Women also account for only 5.45% of the total workforce (as of the 1st of April 2026).

To encourage the recruitment of women, improving the work environment is necessary. There are still some fire stations where there is no sleeping area or bathroom for women. The city fire department is now working to renovate facilities and will introduce a maternity uniform for pregnant women.

Other fire departments in Ehime Prefecture have also begun taking measures. The Uwajima Area Administrative Association Fire Department has been providing a work experience program since 2024. The Iyo Fire and other fire departments held their recruitment exam in August 2025, one month earlier than usual, resulting in an increase in applicants from around 20 to 35.

(April 7, Yomiuri Shimbun Online)

First Drivers from Overseas at IYOTETSU

This fiscal year, IYOTETSU Group Co., Ltd. hired a total of 129 new employees across the group, including 25 bus drivers, among whom are two Vietnamese nationals with specified skilled worker No.1 residence status. They are the first foreign drivers the company has ever employed.

One said, "I would like to provide safe and secure service to become a trustworthy driver." The other said, "I am lucky to work in Japan with attractive culture and be a driver for a company with a rich history." The two will begin working on the bus route around June after road training.

In order to make sure sustainable public transportation, the company has emphasized securing human resources as a key issue, along with labor-saving measures through the introduction of cutting-edge technologies such as self-driving buses. There is still a labor shortage and so the company plans to further step up the recruitment of foreign workers in the future.,

(April 2, Ehime Shimbun)