

Dancing Hero –

Mr. Masamitsu Minegishi, Suigun Line Area Manager, likes creating personal business links through his wide range of hobbies and interests.



Mr. Masamitsu Minegishi, 50, was born in Iwaki City, Fukushima Prefecture, north of Tokyo, and joined the Japanese National Railways (JNR) in 1960. His JNR career began at Tsuchiura Station and he was later assigned to the Personnel Division of Mito Railway's Administration Bureau, and the Employees Division of JNR Head Office. He was Stationmaster at Tsuchiura Station before assuming his post as the Area Manager of the Suigun Line. He has recently been appointed Mito Stationmaster.

The two-car diesel train with ivory body and green stripes makes a strong impression as it runs through the harvested rice fields of the local area. The 97-year-old, 150-km Suigun Line connects Mito, the prefectural capital of Ibaraki, about 120 km north of Tokyo, and Koriyama, the commercial centre of Fukushima Prefecture.

The Suigun Line Marketing headquarters was established in March 1992 to modernize the line's management system with a vision of "restoring the train's function" as a vital means of local transportation. The new office aims to achieve an efficient railway business by integrating the Suigun Line's split functions, thereby putting an end to the poor operation symbolized by the falling number of passengers.

All the operating authorities including personnel management, train operation, marketing and engineering are centralised under a single area man-

ager with the freedom to exercise any business improvement measures.

Before being appointed Area Manager in March 1992, Mr. Minegishi became chief of the Suigun Line Renovation Preparation Office in 1991. His mission is to implement efficient management and operation of the Suigun Line.

"There was a general impression that our attempt would fail because the Suigun Line was simply too long," recalls Mr. Minegishi.

It was indeed a big project to revitalize the entire line operation, with only 193 employees, through measures such as introduction of one-man operated cars and unmanned stations at night, and horizontal integration of the train operators, track maintenance workers and other divisions that have conventionally been segregated vertically.

It was hard to form a consensus between employees, and the local people were somewhat suspicious about the proposed project. The fusion of the sales, operation and maintenance divisions sounded wonderful but seemed hard if not impossible to achieve.

The project required investments totalling ¥3,500 million, nearly twice the annual income of the line. As chief of the Renovation Preparation Office, Mr. Minegishi met representatives of the municipalities and asked for their understanding and cooperation with this "big chance for restoration". Internally, he appealed the importance of the project to employees, emphasizing that they should regard it as a great source of pride. He spent day-after-day with

staff members envisaging the proposed goals in an effort to create a consensus beyond the barriers of divisional interests. He spent many evenings with the local people for heart-to-heart talks over beer. His straight-forward enthusiasm for "creating the new Suigun Line" soon fired the imagination of the local people.

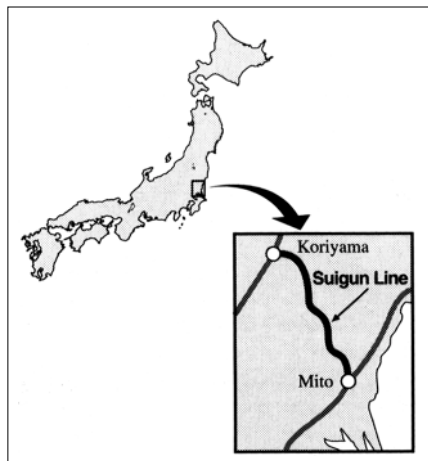
These efforts led to the formation of the "Suigun Line Use Promotion Council" in the Ibaraki area and the "Suigun Line Revitalization Council" in the Fukushima area, both chaired by the respective prefectural governors.

Mr. Minegishi recalls "I was even more determined to make the project successful when I saw the new awareness of the local people about the line".

As part of the project, a total of 31 new, one-man operated diesel cars were introduced. The tracks were improved to increase the speed, thereby reducing the travel time by 22 minutes between Mito and Hitachi Daigo, a major city on the line.

The one-man operated cars were welcomed by the people. The no-smoking rule along the entire line created a new and enhanced image. Mr. Minegishi was most worried about handling the new station operations with fewer people. This, too, saw a very successful start. He could tell that car users were returning to the trains slowly but steadily.

While he is pleased with the project's success, he constantly asks himself "What should I do next?" As a man dedicated to the Suigun Line, he thinks "co-existence with local people" is the





The new Iwaki-Hanawa station was financed both by JR East and the local municipality. It houses a library and a fine-art gallery for local residents.

only way for railways to survive. He also thinks "co-existence with the car-oriented society" is appropriate.

These beliefs are the outcome of a 1 month stay in the USA when he was a member of the Japanese delegation for the "Park and Ride" high-speed mass-transit project once conceived between Los Angeles and San Diego.

Most households along the Suigun Line own two cars. In his mind, cars are an essential part of daily life but the congestion-free services that trains provide somehow seemed to overlap with what he saw in America.

This overlap has led to a strategic co-existence between cars and trains along the Suigun Line which is being achieved by redeveloping areas around major stations like Hitachi Omiya, Iwaki Ishikawa, and Hitachi Ota, and consolidation of large parking spaces.

In more sales-oriented projects, various "event trains" have attracted much recent attention from local people. It is an attempt to increase income from the non-commuter passengers. For example, the "Golf Tournament Train" took people to a golf course for a day, while the "Sake Train" attracted many people who enjoyed tasting different brands of locally-produced *sake* rice wines. These events are planned, promoted, and executed entirely by Suigun Line employees.

"Quick decision making and autonomy are the best elements of our area", according to Mr. Minegishi. Mr. Minegishi is very pleased with station employees who become sales staff after 5 pm, meeting local people and listen-

ing to their needs.

Now, Mr. Minegishi is busy making more aggressive sales calls outside his own area. Local people and enterprises rely more on the trains than ever before and the new services are creating new customers from other areas including Tokyo. Mr. Minegishi and his staff are busy selling their new trains and services to more prospective customers in Tokyo and other markets. For example, trains featuring barbecue parties and fireworks, catching carp by hand, *origami*, etc., attract many people.

The Suigun Line runs through many scenic spots including waterfalls, apple orchards, hot springs and many other leisure destinations for families. Mr. Minegishi predicts great potential for "One-day or overnight low-cost tours".

He has spent most of his career in personnel, labour, and other desk jobs. Asked where he learned all these successful marketing techniques, he answered, "These ideas do not just pop up. They are the outcome of daily observation and analysis".

He is one of the few people in the area who can speak English. "Studying a foreign language is good for my head. I enjoy learning about different cultures and ways of thinking. I began making a special effort to learn English after graduating from college. It has become a hobby now. I subscribe to a couple of English study programs on the radio. In addition to learning the language itself, I enjoy the short stories in the textbooks because I can learn about business in other countries".

When he was stationmaster at Tsuchiura Station, he belonged to a dance school with some of his customers. He must have been a very good student because he later won the prefectural dance championship. He just laughed when asked if the dancing practice had anything to do with success in his present job. "It certainly helped to correct my middle-aged back problem" was the answer.

His busy daily schedule keeps Mr. Minegishi away from other hobbies including mountain climbing and golf. "We have just begun," he said about the corporate effort to revitalize the Suigun Line. He is determined to keep the century-old line safe and sound for another 100 years. ■



Courtesy: R. Kawamata