

Man'yo Line—Revitalized Tramway

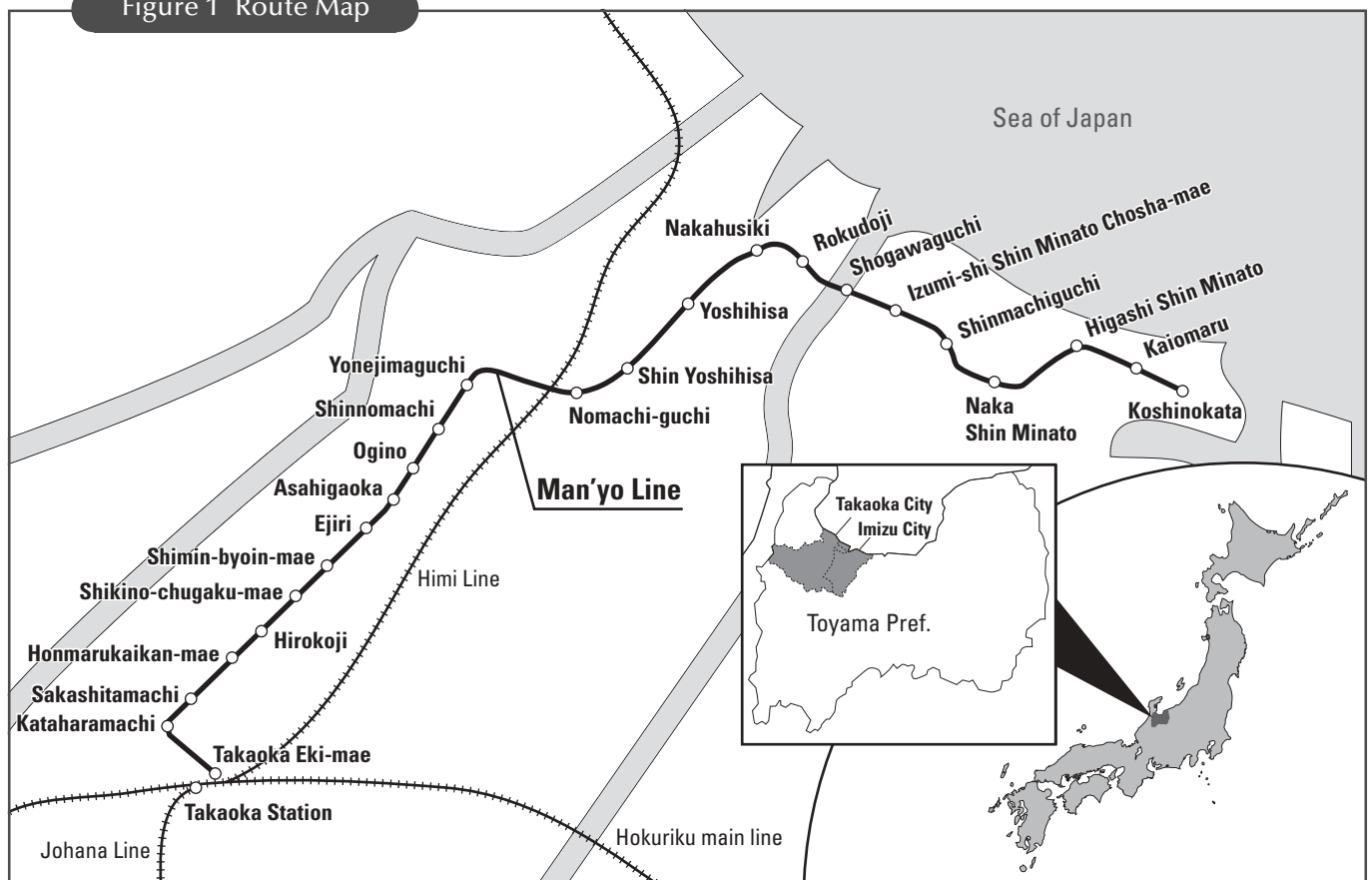
Introduction

The Man'yo Line (12.9 km) is in Toyoma Prefecture in central Japan and connects Takaoka City with the Shin Minato district of Imizu City (Fig. 1). Although part of the suburban section is classified as a railway line, the operations and rolling stock are typical of a tramway. The single tramcars carry about 1.13 million passengers annually along the extremely attractive route with constantly changing scenery for about 40 minutes through the urban district, industrial zone and old townscape, along the harbour, and across a bridge at the mouth of the Sho River.

The Man'yo Line is one of the smallest tramways in Japan and, like other local railways, it was negatively affected by the rapid growth in private automobile ownership during the latter 1960s, as well as by more recent urban depopulation along its route. This caused a decline in the number of passengers to less than 25% of the peak in the late 1960s (4.75 million). The national government's decision to remove deficit subsidies from FY1997 forced the line to consider closure.

However, although railway lines were being closed elsewhere, the local inhabitants expressed their opinion that the 'The Man'yo Line is indispensable' so a citizen-

Figure 1 Route Map



wide agreement uniting trackside residents, government, and financial and political circles was reached in April 2002 with the aim of reviving the line as Japan's first third-sector line.

People Power and Government and Operator Approaches

This unified demand by citizens, government and operator to continue operation of a small tramway was a completely new approach for Japan and the greatest factor in deciding to continue was people power. As the debate over continuation or closure was building, The Rail & Road Transit System, Amenity and Community Design Association of Takaoka (RACDA Takaoka) was established in 1997 to promote the need for the Man'yo Line from the citizens' viewpoint. This association did not run a traditional 'ride-to-keep' campaign, but instead formed a campaign caravan, which visited various locations to broadly appeal the need for public transport, including the Man'yo Line; fundraising collected ¥100 million in seed capital to start the new company. Instead of leaving things to the government, the people strongly promoted the need for railways by thinking, providing funds, and acting on their own initiative.



Series 7000 running through city street decorated for Tanabata (Weaver Star) festival (Man'yosen)



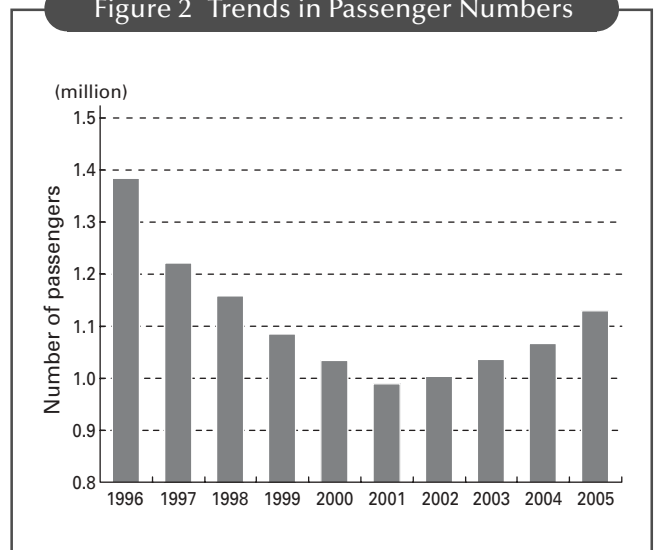
Series MLRV1000 AI-TRAM

(Man'yosen)

Motivated by the active efforts of the citizens, the government also adopted a number of new measures. One was to clearly position the anticipated ¥580 million yen deficit expected in the 10-year period after the new company started as 'maintenance costs for necessary social capital.' As a consequence, the two trackside cities agreed to an annual line subsidy of up to ¥60 million. This novel idea overturned the conventional thinking that operating deficits are the operator's responsibility. In addition, the Subsidy Program for Railway and Track Modernization was used to improve the aging tracks and rolling stock to avoid undue burden on the operator. Under this programme, Toyoma Prefecture provided a local government cooperative subsidy equal to the subsidy received from the national government (between 33% and 20% of the project cost). The two trackside cities then subsidized the remainder that would normally be borne by the operator. This helped promote service improvements, such as introduction of new low-floor cars, which in turn helped increase the number of less-mobile and elderly passengers.

Having been the recipient of this people power and government support, the third-sector Man'yo Line Company operating the line also took novel measures unhampered by conventional railway business wisdom to improve its revenues. For example, it holds joint trackside events with the Man'yo Line Countermeasures Council, RACDA Takaoka and other support groups to create irregular extra passenger demand. It has created an annual student season ticket that generates student traffic out of term time, as well as a ride-and-cycle system that loans recycled bicycles to commuters at no charge. It has also created a discount system through tie-ups with trackside tourist and other facilities, and has resolutely reduced fares by an average of 18% in the second year of service, etc. In addition, thorough efforts have been made to reduce expenses by eliminating waste and cutting personnel costs.

Figure 2 Trends in Passenger Numbers



Passenger Numbers Recovering and Revenues Increasing

The number of Man'yo Line passengers has been recovering gradually as a result of these unified efforts by the citizens, government and operator (Fig. 2). It recovered from 988,000 passenger journeys in FY2001 to 1 million in FY2002 when the line was restarted as a new company, and has increased steadily since then to more than 1.13 million journeys in FY2005. In addition, the operating deficit of more than ¥70 million has improved to ¥53 million in FY2005.

Especially noteworthy is how a small local private operator faced with a severe business environment has managed to increase its number of passengers for 4 years in succession. There are now great hopes that the revitalized Man'yo Line will help support revitalization of trackside communities and the operator is continuing to make even greater efforts to meet these expectations.