
Roles and Charms of *Michi-no-Eki*, and Prospects for a Global Brand

“*Michi-no-Eki*,” or roadside stations, stand as distinctive Japanese establishments that foster vibrancy within local communities. We spoke with Niwa Katsuhiko, Director-General, the Road Bureau at the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, about the purposes, functions, establishment, current state, and prospects of *Michi-no-Eki* facilities.

Could you please explain what kind of facilities *Michi-no-Eki* are in Japan? Also, could you introduce the background of their establishment, the initial and current numbers, as well as their types?

“*Michi-no-Eki*” are rest facilities positioned along regular roads, designed to offer road

users a safe and comfortable road traffic environment as well as foster local community development. Their registration is overseen by the Road Bureau under the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, following applications from municipalities and other responsible entities. To attain *Michi-no-Eki* status, these establishments must provide 24-hour free parking and restroom facilities, platforms for giving road and local tourist information, and amenities for regional promotion.

Furthermore, those providers responsible for installation (the road administrator or municipality) frequently establish a wide array of facilities customized to the distinctiveness of each region based on creative concepts. These include



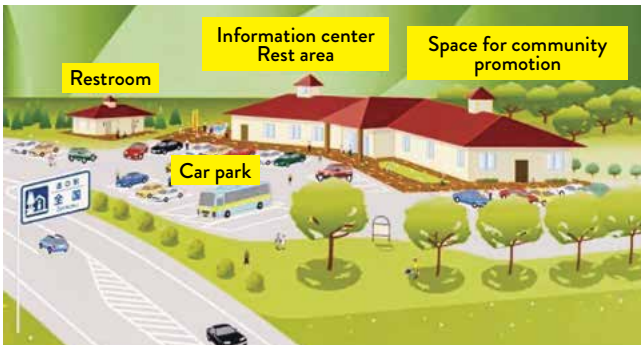
Niwa Katsuhiko
Director-General, Road
Bureau at the Ministry of
Land, Infrastructure,
Transport and Tourism



Michi-no-Eki Asobounosato Kugino was used as a base for relief efforts during the 2016 Kumamoto earthquake.

Overview of typical *Michi-no-Eki* facilities

(Material provided by the Road Bureau, Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism)



The car park, restroom, information center, and rest area will be developed by the road administrator or municipality

The space for community promotion (including culture sharing and tourism/recreational facilities, etc.) will be developed by the municipality

local specialty stores, markets for agricultural produce, dining establishments, hot springs and accommodation, recreational parks, sports fields, healthcare facilities, and services for the elderly.

The concept of *Michi-no-Eki* is said to have originated during a symposium planned by the former Ministry of Construction's Chugoku Regional Construction Bureau in January 1990. During the symposium, participants proposed the idea that it might be beneficial to have stations with restroom facilities on roads, similar to those found on railways. Following several rounds of social experiments and refinement, the system was formalized. In April 1993, the first round of registrations took place, giving birth to 103 *Michi-no-Eki* facilities. Subsequently, the concept spread across Japan, and as of August 4, 2023, a total of 1,209 stations have been registered as *Michi-no-Eki*.

With over 1200 *Michi-no-Eki* facilities currently established throughout Japan, what factors do you attribute to the widespread proliferation?

The widespread presence of *Michi-no-Eki* can likely be attributed to the freedom and flexibility with which

Functioning as a comprehensive disaster prevention hub during major calamities, *Michi-no-Eki* are expected to serve as a central point for operations by the Self-Defense Forces, police, technical teams, and more, facilitating relief endeavors. Moreover, they are envisioned to play a crucial role as bases for restoring essential facilities including emergency supplies, and to aid in reconstruction efforts.



Purposes of *Michi-no-Eki*

- Provide a safe and comfortable road traffic environment for road users
- Contribute to community promotion

Functions of *Michi-no-Eki*

Rest

24-hour free parking and restrooms

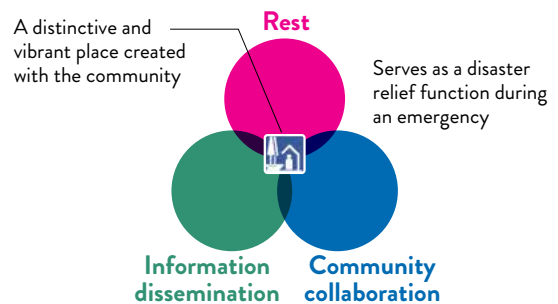
Information dissemination

Road, local tourism, and emergency medical information, etc.

Community collaboration

For promoting the area's cultural and recreational facilities

Basic Concept of *Michi-no-Eki*



Purposes and functions of *Michi-no-Eki* (Material provided by the Road Bureau, Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism)

they are established and operated, driven by the creative ideas and initiatives of local communities. The distinctiveness of each station plays a significant role. In *Michi-no-Eki*, it is crucial to encourage innovative and distinctive ideas that align with the unique circumstances of each region. Looking at it from this perspective, we convey the core idea of *Michi-no-Eki* as “a distinctive and vibrant space co-created with the local community, equipped with functions for rest, information dissemination, and community collaboration.” While the registration process involves governmental consent, the specific concept of each *Michi-no-Eki* is shaped by the local residents, emphasizing the importance of embracing diverse and creative thinking.

In the development of the *Michi-no-Eki* policy, its role has evolved over time. Initially, it served as a resting place for drivers (Stage 1). Gradually, it transformed into a destination for travelers (Stage 2) and now is expected to play a role in revitalizing entire regions, serving as a hub for local development, tourism, and disaster prevention (Stage 3). In this Stage 3,

the most significant role entrusted to *Michi-no-Eki* is seen as “introducing the allure of the region and energizing the local community.”

Michi-no-Eki is expected to play a role in enhancing the appeal of each region and addressing local challenges. In response to these expectations, municipalities and others responsible for their installation have collaborated to generate various ideas and undertake innovative plans. A multitude of distinctive *Michi-no-Eki* facilities have emerged as a result of these creative endeavors, reflecting the unique character of each locale.

What might be the allure of *Michi-no-Eki* for local residents and visitors alike?

In today's world where convenience stores and the internet provide access to almost everything, the allure of *Michi-no-Eki* lies in its unique offering: the experience and items that can only be found by going there. This aspect is of utmost importance. *Michi-no-Eki* serve as places for rediscovering local charm, where visitors not only take a break and shop, but also

resonate with and are moved by the region's attractions and assets. We anticipate that those who visit *Michi-no-Eki* become fans of the entire region, enhancing their understanding of the local cultural climate as the backdrop. This in turn will contribute to the overall vitality and excitement of the region as the number of fans increases.

Moreover, in disaster-prone Japan, *Michi-no-Eki* are also greatly anticipated to fulfill a role in disaster prevention. During significant events such as the Niigata-Chuetsu Earthquake in 2004 and the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, *Michi-no-Eki* played a vital role as shelters, platforms for giving road and disaster information, and bases for comprehensive rescue and recovery efforts. In disaster-prone Japan, the development of communities that can respond appropriately to various disasters will continue to be a very important issue. In light of these national circumstances, *Michi-no-Eki* are also expected to serve as a hub for disaster prevention, recovery, and reconstruction, contributing to the resilience of communities in times of crisis.



Michi-no-Eki Yunishigawa has a foreign tourist information center.



At the information center of *Michi-no-Eki* Niseko View Plaza in Hokkaido, staff from the local tourism association provide guidance on the town and nearby attractions. As a designated priority *Michi-no-Eki* to actively attract foreign tourists, it has implemented digital signage to provide regional information in English and provides WiFi access points that link to the Niseko tourism Facebook page, aiming to actively engage with English-speaking visitors.

In recent times, there has been an increase in the number of tourists visiting *Michi-no-Eki*, including both domestic and international visitors. Could you please share your outlook for the future?

After a quarter-century since the start of *Michi-no-Eki*, a new challenge has emerged since 2020: the goal to transform *Michi-no-Eki* into a global brand. This initiative aims to attract foreign tourists and promote *Michi-no-Eki* internationally. Enhanced efforts include offering multilingual support, establishing foreign tourist information centers, and introducing cashless payment systems to enrich basic services. Some *Michi-no-Eki* have actively embraced foreign visitors, offering cultural experiences and tourism services utilizing various means of transportation such as buses, bicycles, and rental cars to explore the region.

For instance, *Michi-no-Eki* Niseko View Plaza located in Niseko, Hokkaido, serves as a gateway for foreign tourists visiting the breathtaking natural landscapes and internationally renowned Niseko Ski Resort in

the region. With the implementation of multilingual information services and the establishment of accommodation facilities and restaurants catering to foreign visitors in collaboration with the community, the number of foreign tourists has been steadily increasing over the years.

Michi-no-Eki hold plenty of charms and expectations, and I believe that they have substantial potential, with continuous room for evolution. I am committed to raising awareness about these uniquely Japanese *Michi-no-Eki* that we can take pride in on the global stage. Our aim is to further develop and promote *Michi-no-Eki*, ensuring that they are utilized by a diverse range of individuals, including foreign visitors. ㊦

