

# Creating Attractive Communities with the Help of Residents

## Hirosaki City



### Background

In the conventional style of administrative management, it has become difficult to deal appropriately with a wide variety of issues due to the advance of devolution, the low birth-rate, the aging population/depopulation, and the diversification of citizens' needs. In order for citizens and local governments to be able to work together to tackle and find solutions to challenges that cannot be solved by citizens or local governments alone, it is necessary to promote a wide range of citizens' activities for community renovation, and ensure effective cooperation.

In his election campaign platform, Mayor Noriyuki Kasai called for introducing a Citizen Participation System for Community Renovation financed by 1% of municipal tax revenue. After taking office, he turned the policy plan into a project of the city and launched a system in June 2011 for assisting specific projects.

### Purpose of Project

Support the efforts of civic activity groups (neighbourhood associations, non-profit organisations and volunteer groups etc.), in grappling with local challenges and revitalising communities under their own initiatives.

### Outline of Project

This system is a subsidy system launched in fiscal 2011 that is open to applications from members of the public. Using the equivalent of 1% of individual municipal tax revenue, the system partially finances the expenses of community renovation measures undertaken by citizens. Any citizen who

meets the eligibility standards can apply for subsidies under the system, and the municipal government decides whether to subsidise proposed projects after open reviews by a screening committee consisting of 15 citizens selected mainly under an open application method. (The subsidy finances up to 90% of the eligible expenses for an approved project, with the upper limit set at 500,000 yen per project in principle.)

The number of projects assisted by the subsidy system was 23 in fiscal 2011, 43 in fiscal 2012, 50 in fiscal 2013, 57 in fiscal 2014 and 42 in fiscal 2015.

In addition to the solution of local challenges and community renovation, the approved projects encompass a wide range of fields, including welfare, health enhancement, the promotion of culture, the environment and agriculture.

Each member of the screening committee serves a two-year term, with reappointment possible.

### Features and Advanced Aspects

Over the five years since the launch of the subsidy system, public recognition of it has increased gradually, thanks to descriptions of approved projects by the city's public relations journal and website, as well as publicity campaigns aimed at civic activity groups, including neighbourhood associations and NPOs. One of the system's features is the many applications from local community groups such as neighbourhood associations.

The municipal government has received subsidy applications for health enhancement projects every year since fiscal 2012. Applications have

also been filed by student groups, suggesting that a broadening range of Hirosaki citizens are voluntarily looking at and tackling challenges in the city.

## Effects of Project

In the planning stage, the municipal government expected the subsidy system to stimulate active efforts by citizens to resolve a wide variety of community challenges and revitalise the region, which would in turn promote initiatives led by citizens to make the city more attractive.

Effects by category cannot be shown, since no statistics have been taken individually for the effects of specific projects. Still, the effects of the whole of the Hirosaki City Citizen Participation System for Community Renovation Financed by 1% of Municipal Tax Revenue can be summed up by the large number of projects that have been proposed by citizens who play leadership roles and adopted by the municipal government since the start of the subsidy system.

There have been reports from groups that used the subsidy system that their projects triggered positive responses, such as cooperation from young people and efforts by citizens to do all they can to solve community challenges.

After using the subsidy system, some groups continued their projects by accepting donations and other forms of assistance, indicating the effectiveness of the system in linking people and expanding the power of citizens.

Following are examples of distinctive projects helped by the subsidy system:

### ◆The "ARTippo" project to support young artists

In November 2011 and March 2012, an incorporated NPO held a workshop to provide a total of 174 young writers and other artists who work individually in Hirosaki with opportunities to learn about the creation of works, display

methods, and expression. The project encouraged participants to take further steps, such as holding an individual exhibition or opening a shop.

### ◆Apple production in coexistence with owls

From July 2014 to March 2015, local farmers' group "'Fukuro no Kai"' (owl's association) raised owls, a natural predator of mice, by setting up nest boxes at apple farms, to tackle serious damage to apples by mice. Baby owls were born and matured steadily under the project. With the participation of not only apple growers but also local residents, the project contributed to raising people's interest in environmental conservation.



Mount Iwaki eco-project



A lavender-lined road recovery project

## Problems and Responses

### ◆Before Project Implementation

According to a survey about the proposal for the subsidy system, only about 30% of civic activity groups, including neighbourhood associations, incorporated NPOs and volunteer groups, said they wanted to use the system to carry out specific projects. Among neighbourhood associations, the

share was particularly low, at approximately 20%. Explaining the reasons for viewing the system as difficult to use, neighbourhood associations said there was no one who could work out plans for new projects, they did not expect people to take part in new projects and it was not easy to complete application procedures, such as preparing necessary documents.

When the subsidy system was established, the municipal government sent application guidebooks to the civic activity groups covered in the survey and held briefing sessions on filing applications in an effort to help them understand the system and to respond to opinions and questions about it.

#### ◆After Start of Project

After the launch of the subsidy system, the municipal government was soon heavily involved in the application screening process, by stating its opinions on proposed projects before they were reviewed by the screening committee. It was also difficult to facilitate communications between applicant groups and screening committee members. During review sessions, rules called for screening committee members to stand up in the presence of applicants to show their approval of the proposed projects for subsidies, and some members were unsure about whether to signal their approval in such direct way.

Later, screening committee members began giving advice to applicants at question-and answer sessions, telling applicants, for example, about how their proposed projects might be improved. This way, screening panel members not only decide whether to approve submitted projects but also discuss the proposals from the viewpoint of citizens as cheerleaders for applicant groups. In addition, the committee adopted point-based evaluations for screening decisions, instead of the stand-up method.

The screening committee conducts a regular review of the subsidy system every year, aiming to make it more usable for citizens. Specifically, the committee makes necessary changes to the screening method, application forms and the periods of projects covered by the system, while also expanding the range of expenses that can be subsidised.

After last year's system review meeting, examination items and point allocations were modified, effective from the current fiscal year. The modifications were based on views expressed at the meeting that examination items need to be useful for civic activity groups when they file applications and that screenings should be conducted in a way that contributes to approving truly appropriate projects for subsidies.



Ensuring the safety of children on their way to and from school

#### Outlook

Projects proposed by citizens are aimed primarily at solving challenges for communities, but many projects failed to achieve their goals as the project periods covered by the subsidy system were too short to solve the challenges. The number of citizens willing to take on challenges, therefore, is still seen as small. The municipal government considers it necessary to set up a system to help local residents continue their projects under their own initiatives and an organisational structure that supports this.

To ensure the continuity of the Hirosaki City Citizen Participation System for Community Renovation Financed by 1% of Municipal Tax Revenue, the municipal government and civic activity groups, which are involved in specific projects as partners, need to envision and create paths showing how the projects can be sustained and developed beyond the subsidy system. At the same time, it is necessary to nurture many kinds of citizens' activities. Therefore, the municipal government believes it is important to sustain its efforts to encourage the wider use of the subsidy system through educational campaigns, with the aim of making the system more useable for the citizens of Hirosaki.

### **Reference URL**

<http://www.city.hirosaki.aomori.jp/jouhou/seido/ichi-percent/index.html> \*Japanese

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