



Mayor Tomioka of the “new” Kumagaya city talks about Kumagaya’s two stage merger with Osato, Konan, and Menuuma towns

Translated by Jason Buckley, Japan Local Government Centre, London Office (www.jlgc.org.uk), with permission

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Introduction

On the 13th of February 2007 the northern Saitama prefecture towns of Osato, Menuuma, and Konan, and the city of Kumagaya went through a unique two-stage merger to form the new Kumagaya city.

The new Kumagaya city has a population of around 207,000 and an area of 159.88km² which is mostly flat terrain with much rich, green countryside. The Arakawa River, the widest river in Japan, and the Tone River, with the largest basin size of all rivers in Japan, flow through the city. The urban foundation is well developed with a number of rail lines, including two bullet train lines, passing through Kumagaya Station. Four national highway routes also pass through the city connecting it with the transportation hubs of Northern Kanto.

Kumagaya city is a leading industrial base within Saitama prefecture, ranking third for total value of commercial sales, forth for production and shipped output, and second in agricultural production. The infamously hot summers and dry winter 'Akagi' winds bring a distinct feel to the four seasons. In fact, on the 16th of August 2007 a temperature of 40.9 degrees Celsius was recorded, breaking Japan's previous record set 74 years prior.

Opportunity for a merger arises

The 'great Heisei merger' describes the period in Japan since the start of the Heisei period in 1989 when a great many municipalities, especially in the western part of the country, merged



to form larger municipalities. This was encouraged by central government mainly due to the savings that could be made when the administration of local services covered larger areas. Municipalities within the Osato district of Saitama prefecture had also been developing broader-based public services in areas such as waste management and the care insurance system, and in June 2002 the leaders (directly elected mayors and council chairs) of the two cities and seven towns in the district formed a research group to examine the possibility of a merger.

This research group examined the state of public administration at the time, put together financial scenarios, and conducted merger-related surveys. Most of the results were positive, but it was also clear that there were different degrees of enthusiasm and direction in regards to merging, and in January 2003 the group came to a constructive end.

Kumagaya-Osato-Konan-Menuma merger council

I first realised the need for urban planning that utilises economies of scale through merging after reflecting on issues such as what size a municipality we would need to become to be eligible for more powers and how to best deal with the burning issue of demographic change – a low birth-rate and an ageing population. Therefore, I visited the mayors of Osato, Konan, and Menuma towns and called on them to further consider the possibility of a merger. Thus, in April 2003 the Kumagaya-Osato-Konan-Menuma merger council was established. There were ten meetings overall in which we discussed the finer details of merger arrangements, concluding with a plan for the new city. However, the residents of Konan town ended up voting against the planned merger in a referendum in March 2004, resulting in the mayor of Konan town handing in his notice of withdrawal. This brought the council to an end after just over a year.

Stage One – Kumagaya-Osato-Menuma merger council

With the withdrawal of Konan town we had no choice but go back to the drawing board. Despite the setback, the state of society was basically unchanged, and I was still convinced that the future of the region depended on a merger. The mayors of Osato and Menuma towns



believed the same and both proposed a new merger council under a new framework, resulting in the formation of the Kumagaya-Osato-Menuma merger council in June 2004. We were able to carry over many elements of the previous merger discussions so everything was agreed after only six meetings. In October 2005 the first “new” Kumagaya city was born.

Stage Two – Kumagaya-Konan merger council

While preparations for the Kumagaya-Osato-Menuma merger were being made in June 2005, Konan town submitted a request for its quick inclusion into the merger following a campaign by a group of residents who obtained enough signatures to form a majority of the electorate supporting this demand. At a council meeting in January 2006 a resolution seeking the establishment of a merger council for Konan town and the new Kumagaya city was approved which resulted in the formation of the Kumagaya-Konan merger council in April 2006.

We were able to put the details of the agreement in order in only about three months as one of the conditions for proceeding with talks was that the system of the newly merged city would match the system in place at Kumagaya at the time (which excluded the application of the law in which councillors of merging municipalities may retain their seat for two years after a merger). The talks were a success, and on the 13th of February 2007 the new Kumagaya city was born, the first city in northern Saitama prefecture with a population of over 200,000.

Merger expectations

In the survey taken before the establishment of the Kumagaya-Osato-Menuma-Konan merger council, the main expectations residents had from a merger were a reduction in government expenditure through increased organisational efficiency, better quality and diversification of services, and an improvement of the image and vitality of the area.

In fact, due to the reduction in the number of councillors, people in top positions, and regular staff following the merger, the new city has been able to reduce costs drastically. And due to special tax grants and financial support received from central government, Kumagaya has been able to devote more resources to the improvement of public services, such as increasing



payments towards children's medical expenses (extended to the end of middle school), setting up automated external defibrillators in city run institutions, and upgrading of fire engines and ambulances.

Also, after the second stage merger with Konan town the population of Kumagaya city exceeded 200,000, enough to be classified as a Special City, giving us greater independence. It is my belief that with 200,000 residents sharing local resources, including rich traditions and culture, the city has a very bright future.

Merger concerns

According to the same survey, the areas in which residents expressed most concern regarding a possible merger included difficulties in having their voices heard by the local authority, and disparities between the central area and outer areas of the city.

I have had no less than 120 very productive meetings with residents where these and other concerns were discussed freely. As well as this, we have set up feedback systems and a council of community leaders so that the concerns of residents reach the local authority.

Also, under the New General Development Plan which started in April 2008, each administrative centre (which prior to the merger were the town halls) is given the status of "local headquarters"; and these will aim to achieve a distribution of functions while maximising each area's special characteristics, growing into an organic network. This forms the main principle of the plan.

Post merger prospects

Three years have now passed since the first merger. The integration of things previously unresolved, such as national health insurance tax and water rates, is now in sight, and through the New General Development Plan, place shaping with the vision of Kumagaya as a "twin river city in harmony with the environment" has fully begun. Furthermore, this plan was set out so that from the early stages it involved the participation of publicly recruited citizens as co-opted



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There are a number of policies outlined in the New General Development Plan such as the 'attractive town' policy, 'cooperation between city hall and citizens' policy, 'safe, peaceful lifestyle' policy, and the 'abundance of nature' policy. As well as these policies, there are cross-cutting projects in areas of high importance such as those involving the health and well-being of residents, climate change, image improvement, and childraising.

One of our initiatives that has attracted attention is our heat-stroke prevention service, where we work in cooperation with the Japan Weather Association to notify people via their mobile phones of the heatstroke index for each particular district. Another is our childraising support service, where children up to the end of middle school receive free medical treatment.

Conclusion

A merger is not an end. Rather, it is a means to an end. We will continue to aim for administrative and financial reform that maximises the economies of scale achievable through merging, and further fuse and develop the outstanding special characteristics and traditions that have been cultivated in the former towns and cities. It is my mission to take Kumagaya into the future and make it a city worthy of praise.