

NEW TRAIN STATION OPENS

Text by Tetsu Dosen

March 15th saw the opening of Okayama's newest train station. Located between JR Okayama Station (2.6km away) and JR Takashima Station (1.9km away), JR Nishigawara Station is the first new station to open in Okayama since Kitanagase Station was opened in 2005. The construction of a new station in Nishigawara was being debated at the time Kitanagase opened, but Kitanagase was pushed ahead to cater for passengers heading to Okayama Dome for the National Sports Festival (Kokutai.) In the end the bill for the new Nishigawara Station was paid by nearby Shujitsu University.

Shujitsu University Funds Construction

Japan's population is officially in decline, but new technical colleges and specialist schools continue to open, creating more and more competition for a smaller pool of students. Shujitsu University's solution was to improve access to its campus in the west of Okayama, making it more attractive to potential students. The JR Aiko Line and JR Sanyo Line both ran past Shujitsu's campus as they snaked their way to the center of the city and the university had been pressing JR to open a new station for many years. At one stage, a huge billboard calling on JR to build a new station "as soon as possible" was hung from the university building. The university was so keen to build the new station that it ended up paying the 270 million yen needed to build two platforms to cater for trains of up to 7 carriages in length, one storey above the ground. All 155 local line trains that use the Aiko and Sanyo lines now stop at Nishigawara, and it is expected that 2000 passengers will use the station every day once the new school year begins.



The station's official name is JR Nishigawara, and JR timetables display that name, but signboards on the platforms and announcements by train conductors refer to the station as "Nishigawara-Shujitsu." Shujitsu University and Shujitsu College will obviously benefit from this "advertising" and from being able to have more students commute to the campus.

Costs, Benefits and Local Concerns

The new station's 270 million yen price-tag is remarkably less than the 900 million yen cost of Kitanagase Station, but the cost of land in the surrounding Nishigawara area may not rise as much as it did in Kitanagase. Admittedly Kitanagase Station was not the only infrastructure investment in that area, but the station certainly improved accessibility to Okayama and Kurashiki for



The ramp for access to the elevated platforms.

local residents. By contrast, many of the rental properties in the Nishigawara area are occupied by Shujitsu students. For these students, the opening of a train station only 50 meters from their campus creates opportunities for an easier commute from locations further away, and this may result in lower demand for rental properties in the area, thus lowering real estate values. Some real estate agents even speculate that the area to the west of JR Okayama station may see increased demand as Shujitsu students move there to be closer to the city center.

Local residents are also expressing concern that the new station will increase traffic on the narrow streets in the area. Almost half of the students at nearby Sozan High School and Sozan Junior High School used Okayama Station to commute to school in the last school year, and with a new station only 7-minutes walk from the school gates, the number of train commuters will surely increase.

Whether local real estate prices increase or not, schools in the area will certainly become more attractive for the students who use trains to get to them.



2000 people are expected to use this station every day.