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Small Business

# Putting the systems together

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Louis Cheng is the principal and president of Mechanical Engineers of Hawaii Corp. The Honolulu-based company provides consulting services across a wide spectrum of engineering projects, from airports to military installations and entertainment venues.

For the past 40 years, Cheng and his team have worked on a number of big projects, including the USS Arizona Memorial Visitors Center, Onizuka Space Center relocation and the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel renovation following earthquake damage.

While the company has only a total of 15 employees, turnover is almost nonexistent. On its website, MEH says that most of its staff has been with the firm longer than 15 years. In the past decade, MEH has added several new qualifications to service offerings, including LEED, a certification developed by the U.S. Green Building Council to recognize sustainable architecture and building.



COURTESY MECHANICAL ENGINEERS OF HAWAII CORPORATION

Louis T.L. Cheng, principal and president of Mechanical Engineers of Hawaii Corp.

Cheng recently spoke with Pacific Business News about his 40 years in the consulting business, the latest engineering trends and the biggest challenges.

**How did the company get its start?** My career began in 1971 working at Phillip Wu & Associates. In 1978, I was made a partner and president, and Mechanical Engineers of Hawaii Corporation (MEH) was incorporated. Phillip retired in 1997, and my fellow partner, Robert Ho, and I, continued MEH, determined to carry on Phillip Wu's legacy. Forty years later, we are in our same location at Kukui Plaza. Robert has since retired, but after working in Virginia, my son, Kyle, returned to Hawaii to join MEH and is now a partner set to lead MEH into the next 40 years.

**What's the secret behind its success?** Being a local Hawaii company, MEH has a thorough understanding and respect for the culture and the people, and feel that the relationships built are as important as providing an exceptional service/product. The laws and business protocol are also very different, and having the knowledge and capability to understand the climate is a big advantage that many clients appreciate. It is important to us that everyone who joins MEH, regardless of their background, also shares our beliefs and respect for Hawaii. We believe the key to a business' success is the employees. We work to develop and keep good employees, and provide them with opportunities in every sector of work and encourage our engineers to be well versed in all aspects of mechanical, plumbing, and fire protection design fields. This allows an engineer to understand how a decision for plumbing, for instance, may affect the fire protection work, in addition to understanding how they will affect other disciplines, such as architectural, structural, electrical, etc. Designing projects with all three fields forces an engineer to become more aware of other trades in a construction project and ultimately produce a better final product for our clients. MEH has always also focused on providing the best and most complete design solutions, on time, and at competitive prices.

**What services do you provide?** MEH provides HVAC, plumbing, and fire protection design consulting services for the building construction

industry. We also offer commissioning, sustainability and construction management services. We are capable of design-build, design-bid-build and construction management services. Our design expertise covers, among other things, air conditioning, industrial ventilation, plumbing, medical piping and fire protection. Our staff has extensive experience and knowledge in climate control and humid-climate air conditioning design including humidity control, where it's important in our Hawaii climate. We have provided mechanical engineering services to a wide spectrum of clients in all levels of the government agencies, private building owners, and business owners.

**How has Hawaii's engineering/consulting market changed over the past 40 years?**

MEH endured Hawaii's recessions and natural disasters, some competitors have entered and exited the industry, the number of building codes and regulations have increased exponentially, laws have gotten increasingly complex, and engineering has become more technical where scientific calculations are now needed to back up designs at every level. In 1978, drawings were done by hand with pencils. Technology evolved and soon computers were used to create 2D drawings. In more recent years, 3D modeling has become very common. All these changes in drawing methods required MEH to change and adapt, and currently 60 percent of our projects are produced in 3D Revit Modeling. With the current trend, I predict that all of our designs will be done on 3D platforms in the next two years. As Hawaii and engineering have changed, MEH has had to evolve, improve, and adapt, and today is known as one of the leading mechanical engineering consulting firms in Hawaii.

**How many projects do you currently work on?** MEH currently has 48 active projects ranging in size and scope, and industries. One of our largest projects was the \$120 million Prince Jonah Kuhio Kalaniana'ole Federal Building and U.S. Federal Courthouse on Ala Moana Blvd, from 2012 to 2015. The combined building floor area is 650,000 square feet and required a full HVAC system replacement with a total capacity of 2,000 tons, and renovations of the plumbing, fire sprinkler and fire alarm systems. We had to work with 57 different federal agencies, each with

their unique requirements, and provided phased design drawings to provide the agencies with temporary working rooms and swing spaces. Our well-rounded staff was able to complete this project on an accelerated schedule in 3D Revit format, when it was not as widely used, back in 2012.

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## **MECHANICAL ENGINEERS OF HAWAII CORP**

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### **HJ Mai**

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