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Hawaii businesses changing plans to cope with SARS

Isle companies cancel travel plans to Asia and sign on to learn about videoconferencing

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Cancellations and postponed travel have been the main disruptions for Hawaii residents who planned business or educational trips to China, Hong Kong and other areas in southeast Asia affected by the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome.

That fallout could be more far-reaching, however, if SARS spreads further or takes longer to get under control, say those familiar with the situation.

For local architecture firm **Wimberly, Allison Tong & Goo**, with eight to 10 ongoing projects in China, there has been lots of e-mail, phone calls and videoconferencing to get the job done, said Dawn Matsuyama Dunbar, the company's marketing and business development representative.

"If someone needs to see sketches or plans, we can send them either express mail a CD or via e-mail," she said. "In terms of travel we've certainly been more cautious. Everyone is waiting to see what will happen. Normally some of our people will travel between two and four times a month but so far it hasn't really affected progress on any of our projects."

The Hong Kong Business Association of Hawaii is planning a panel

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discussion next month to discuss the impact of SARS on business. They'll also talk about what alternatives are available to members, many of whom do business with Chinese companies or partner with them, said Laisin Lee, president of the association.

Experts on videoconferencing and other communication technologies will be included on the panel to advise on alternatives for those who commute between Hawaii and Hong Kong and China for business, Lee said.

SARS is also likely to be a hot topic at a China business opportunities videoconference on Tuesday, hosted by the state Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism. Already, the event has attracted a larger-than-expected crowd and the venue was changed to the Hawaii Convention Center, said DBEDT spokesman Mark Want.

The state Department of Health has seen an increase in calls from people inquiring about travel, said department spokeswoman Janice Okubo.

"What we've been saying is that if travel is not absolutely necessary, you may want to consider putting it off," Okubo said. "If you have to travel, we emphasize good hygiene and you may want to consider wearing a mask."

But just how much of an impact SARS could potentially have on future trade for many businesses is already being felt at China's largest industry trade show.

In Guangzhou, attendance at the Canton Trade Fair, a major stop for commercial buyers worldwide, has so far been a fraction of the usual numbers it attracts. The event, which runs through the end of the month, had drawn 16,433 merchants by April 22. The fair attracted 135,482 over two six-day sessions when it was last held in October. Moreover, the fair had generated \$3.3 billion in export orders so far, down from \$9.3 billion at the same point last year, according to Bloomberg News.

Although few companies in the United States are reporting manufacturing slowdowns or problems with receiving goods yet, that could change as buying trips, business meetings and other related activities get further pushed back.

"When merchandise gets shipped it's usually ordered well in advance so a lot of shipping is most likely already in containers on the way here," said Johnson Choi, president of the Hawaii-Hong Kong Chamber of Commerce.

But with orders being placed now for the future, such as those required for the Christmas season, it takes a few months for those orders to be turned around, Lee said.

"Those would arrive in the last quarter," she said.

Lee and Choi say the biggest problem so far has been for those who had traveled earlier to the region before it became clear how serious the situation was.

"They've faced problems going back to work, we had members who came back and were forced to stay home for 10 days. Then there's all the rumors and uncertainty. That's the most unsettling thing. People are afraid of backlash," Choi said.

New business development, or deals that were in the process of being done, have also suffered, Choi said.

"What is hurting is newly developing business. Say you had a project in China, like developing a hotel and needed to go to the site. Those kinds of things are being pushed back," he said.

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