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Road to recovery: How ICON Park's CEO plans to bring back tourists

[Chris Jaskiewicz](#) has had a front row seat to several economic recessions in his career. He worked in New York City during the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the 2003 northeast blackout and when Hurricane Sandy hit in 2012.

So, unfortunately, navigating an economic crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic is not entirely new to the president and CEO of Icon Park.

The 20-acre Icon Park complex is home to several attractions, including the 400-foot The Wheel, Madame Tussauds wax museum and Sea Life Aquarium, as well as shops and restaurants such as Yard House, Shake Shack, Tin Roof and country music star Blake Shelton's newly-opened Ole Red, which debuted June 19.

Some developments during Jaskiewicz's tenure include the creation of the Wheelhouse Market food hall, which features unique dining options including Jillycakes, a former champion on Food Network's Cupcake Wars. In February, Icon Park launched its Play Pass that grants access to many of the Icon park's attractions and amenities. Both features have helped draw more visitation to the destination, Jaskiewicz told *Orlando Business Journal*.

Up next is a transformation of its outside area to further improve the entertainment, dining and cultural aspects of Icon Park. It plans to create an immersive marketplace experience on its front lawn with 15 semi-permanent retail and food kiosks, as well as convert part of its parking garage into retail space.

The first four kiosks will be installed within the next three to four months. One of the first kiosk users will be the Museum of Illusions attraction, which will open a larger space at icon Park this year. Museum of Illusions' kiosk likely will create some miniature version of what it offers guests who visit the full-sized attraction. The front lawn area also will be decorated with hanging lights and other aesthetics to create an open-air marketplace feeling to complement Icon Park's entertainment, music and dining options.

Here Jaskiewicz, a Central Florida native, shares more on his outlook for Orlando's tourism industry, what's being done at Icon Park, and what it will take for the region to recover:

What's your take on Orlando's chances to recover tourism? I am confident about our industry's ability to handle this. Who is better able to adapt quickly like this and host tens of thousands of people for a convention than Orlando? It's in our DNA. We are in the guest service business. This will be less challenging for us because of what our people do. We already are trained for excellence in the hottest hospitality market.



Why don't you like I-Drive's "tourist corridor" moniker? I'm going to push hard for this to be more of an "entertainment district." I'm going to start using that descriptor. It's important because locals don't want to go to a "tourist corridor." Even tourists don't want to go to a tourist corridor. And we have amazing things for locals like Tin Roof, which has live entertainment every single night. And Ole Red provides that same kind of vibe for locals. I grew up in Orlando when we had Rosie O'Grady's in Church Street Station and Pleasure Island at Walt Disney World. We have all that type of entertainment here now, and it will keep growing and it will be fun.

So how are you getting that word out to locals and tourists? We are delivering that message not only to people in Orlando, but also Central Florida, the state and even Alabama and Georgia. We spent the last year-and-a-half hammering the message that Icon Park is a destination with restaurants, bars and attractions. We are going to do the same with International Drive — we will lead it. We have the assets. We are not bamboozling anyone, we are telling the truth.

How have you adapted Icon Park with the latest health protocols? It's pretty straight forward. You keep people distant, create a defined entrance and exit, and make it easy for people to be socially distant. We gave everyone riding The Wheel a private capsule. We have barriers and cleaning stations, and put every host in masks. To make sure everyone does their job, we just added to their routines.

How are the Icon Park tenants doing so far? The businesses that are open are doing well enough to stay open and they are sharpening up their marketing messages. Sugar Factory, Yard House and Tin Roof are busy. They are doing great.

What's something you learned so far from this pandemic? We have a duty to promote the place to drive traffic here. It's been an interesting real estate experience. Landlords need tenants to be healthy. Here at Icon Park, we are selling a destination concept, so we are doing everything we can to attract visitors to the entire park.

What will it take for the industry to truly return? We need three things to happen: We need to make sure our message of quality entertainment is made crystal clear to all Floridians and other potential visitors; we need the convention business to resume; and we need air travel to resume. We can't do much about much about air travel and conventions, but we can do a lot about a clear message.

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