

Tourism Leader of the Year Chris Jaskiewicz



Chris Jaskiewicz is leading in a crisis like a giant among giants. He's president and CEO of the \$250 million, 20-acre ICON Park, home to dozens of businesses including The Wheel, one of the tallest observation wheels in the world, and Orlando StarFlyer, the tallest swing ride in the world. He's also at the forefront of helping the tourism industry survive the financial downturn of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Jaskiewicz led the charge to reopen businesses and worked directly with the Orange County Economic Recovery Task Force. "We have a lot of employees to protect and tenants to generate business for, and I wanted to fight hard for them," he said. "We told the task force, 'This is how we are going to operate safely.' To their credit, the members listened and struck a perfect balance between safety and business concerns."

In addition to recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Jaskiewicz highlighted the unique features of ICON Park: "It's an open-air, gate-free park with high-caliber restaurants, attractions and shops that already had strong safety procedures, so it wasn't that hard to add an overlay of COVID-19 best practices."

ICON Park reopened June 3, before Walt Disney World, SeaWorld Orlando and Universal Orlando. But that was just the beginning for Jaskiewicz, who came up with ideas to promote ICON Park's tenant partners and other nearby businesses along International Drive. Traditionally, the area has been most popular with tourists. With travel restricted, he turned his attention to the people who call Central Florida home, brought businesses together and formed the Orlando Entertainment District.

"I grew up in Orlando," he said, "and I remember Church Street Station as a major entertainment hub, and then Pleasure Island at Disney World, and they are gone. I looked around at the entertainment spots at ICON Park — including Blake Shelton's Ole Red restaurant and Tin Roof, both of which offer live music nightly — and I saw 15 attractions in our I-Drive area. I realized we had inherited the mantle of Orlando's entertainment district.

"The way I see it, not even tourists want to go to a tourist corridor, let alone locals, so let's call ourselves the Orlando Entertainment District because that's what we are."

Jaskiewicz's strategy is paying off. "Our weekends are busier than last year, and about 90% of our guests are from Central Florida or elsewhere in the state," he said. "They like that we are fun and affordable with free parking and easy access. Instead of worrying about COVID keeping people from flying into Orlando, we are focused on who is already here. Locals don't have to fly anywhere to have fun. They can drive 15 minutes to the Orlando Entertainment District."

He knew when he took the helm at ICON Park two years ago that he would be leading a young entertainment complex alongside industry titans such as Walt Disney World. To attract attention and guests, he renamed the complex, then called ICON Park 360, and began to brand the property as the best short-stay destination in Florida. A year into his leadership, *USA Today* named ICON Park the No. 1 attraction for kids in Orlando, and *Forbes* magazine called it one of the seven best attractions in Orlando.

Jaskiewicz's earlier career as a sports and entertainment lawyer in New York City at the powerhouse Proskauer Rose firm helped prepare him for the role, as did his time as chief operating officer of a leading Manhattan real-estate development company.

He's excited about the new restaurants and attractions 2021 will bring to ICON Park and optimistic about what's ahead for Central Florida.

"When the pandemic ends, tourism in Orlando will rebound quickly because we are the vacation capital of the world with our climate, our world-class attractions and hotels, our excellent airport and our talented people dedicated to hospitality. Florida is the future, and Central Florida is just that — right in the center of the future."

"I love providing families and friends with an unforgettable experience. At ICON Park, we're in the entertainment business, and we like bringing happiness to people."

— *Chris Jaskiewicz*

To view the live article, click [here](#).