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GUEST OP-ED: CHAFFEE COUNTY FOCUS ON RECREATION IN BALANCE

Posted by guest | Jan 29, 2019

When campaigning last year for the passage of county ballot measure 1A, I wrote that Chaffee County is “not like

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everywhere else” and that committed community action would be required in order to keep it that way. We face three landscape-scale challenges: forest health and wildfire mitigation, preserving our working lands while strengthening the future of agriculture, and sustainably managing outdoor recreation.

The passage of 1A, and the development of Chaffee Common Ground, the program that will implement the ballot measure, have given us the funding and the mechanism for engaging these challenges. Now is the time for the community to step forward.

The Chaffee County Commissioners, land management agencies, our local fire protection districts and Envision Chaffee County are working on a “next generation” Community Wildfire Protection Plan. Also with Envision, we are working hand in hand with the agricultural community to develop strategies for a stronger future for our working lands and the economy and heritage they support. Next week, we will join the conversation on sustainable outdoor recreation. I encourage all residents who have an interest in this – for themselves, the environment, and our local economy – to become a part of this

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conversation by attending a public input session from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. Wednesday February 6, at the Poncha Springs Town Hall.

This meeting will launch the Recreation in Balance Program, a partnership among the U.S. Forest Service Salida Ranger District, the Greater Arkansas River Nature Association (GARNA) and Envision Chaffee County. The program will create a recreation plan that takes us sustainably into the future as we grow in both population and visitation. The Balanced Recreation Plan will inform and support the Chaffee County Comprehensive Plan and will have a direct impact on the development of projects and funding decisions for the Chaffee Common Ground program.

To me, "recreation in balance" means acknowledging that the rapid expansion of recreational use and impacts on public lands and waters can come at the expense of the quality of the experience, not to mention generating conflict with historic uses such as grazing and hunting. Agency leaders acknowledge the enormity of the challenge of managing growth in recreation and they emphasize that community collaboration driving local innovative

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solutions has a better chance for success than the top-down approach provided by the federal government.

State-level leaders have acknowledged this challenge as well, awarding this Chaffee County effort nearly \$100,000 through the Colorado Parks and Wildlife Colorado the Beautiful Grant Program. The funded program will include reconnaissance-level surveys to calibrate the current condition of our public lands, the further development of a monitoring system led by volunteers, identification of “hot spots” in need of ready-response, and coordination of response actions through federal and state land management agencies. CPW is excited about the prospects for this pilot program, both because of the potential for protecting what we value in our valley, but also because the program will be scale-able and transferable to other Colorado communities in need.

Chaffee County truly is not like everywhere else. Our landscape, economic health, and remarkable human capital all set us apart from many less fortunate communities. By taking an intentional, clear-eyed approach to our challenges, and acknowledging from the outset that we may be breaking trail for others, the Recreation in Balance program

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has the potential to be a game-changer for Chaffee County and Colorado as a whole. I hope you will consider leveraging the state's investment in our vision by joining us from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. February 6 in Poncha Springs. I look forward to your presence and your voice.

Greg Felt

Chair, Board of Chaffee County Commissioners

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