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Christo's vision

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THE BUREAU of Land Management currently is accepting public comments on its draft Environmental Impact Statement regarding the artist Christo's "Over the River" proposal for the Arkansas River between Canon City and Salida.

Christo and his recently deceased wife, Jeanne-Claude, originally proposed draping translucent fabric panels over 10.4 miles of the river through the Arkansas River Canyon. Now, however, the draft EIS recommends that the project be scaled back to 5.9 miles, with panels erected at eight locations.

This is important, because there are stretches of U.S. 50 that are inherently dangerous, particularly at some blind curves. Rubber-necking at those points could prove dangerous.

Christo has worked with the Colorado Department of Transportation to manage traffic on the highway, with low speed limits along the display sites. Additionally, there are contingency plans for emergency medical responders, including ambulances and medical helicopters.

Project plans call for its display for two weeks during the summer of 2013, at the earliest, and for the river to remain open to recreation during the installation. The project has met, understandably, with some local opposition. We believe those traffic problems can be ameliorated to the satisfaction of all local communities.

And the benefits of this fantastic project are so great. It will attract visitors to Salida, Canon City and Pueblo, not only from all over the United States but from all over the world. Christo's other projects have clearly demonstrated this. And OTR appears very likely to be the largest project he has ever undertaken.

The boost to the economy of the Upper Arkansas Valley will be immense. Millions of tourist dollars will flow to this area from visitors who are blessed with expansive budgets.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude's inspiration for "Over the River" came in 1985 as they were wrapping Paris' Pont-Neuf and a fabric panel was being elevated over the Seine. The artists began a three-year search for appropriate locations in 1992, considering 89 river locations in the Rocky Mountains.

They narrowed the list to six finalists in Idaho, Wyoming, New Mexico and Colorado. They chose the Arkansas River because its banks are high enough that recreational rafters could enjoy the river at the same time.

The husband-wife team already spent more than \$6 million on environmental studies, design engineering, and wind-tunnel testing of fabrics. As with past projects, "Over The River" will be financed entirely by Christo through the sale of his preparatory drawings, collages, scale models, and early works of the 1950s and 1960s.

If all the kinks can be worked out, and we are confident they can be, "Over the River" promises to be a major tourist draw during its two-week display. Millions of dollars are anticipated to be injected into the regional economy, and the value of the worldwide publicity the project would generate is incalculable.

And can you believe? It'll all be free!