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guest commentary

Don't pass up Christo project

By Barbara O'Brien

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Colorado has a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Christo and Jeanne-Claude — the internationally renowned artists who have brought the world such great works of art as The Gates in New York's Central Park, The Wrapped Trees in Switzerland and The Umbrellas in Japan and California — are planning their next project here in Colorado. Called Over The River, this project involves suspending 5.9 miles of silvery, translucent fabric panels high above the Arkansas River at eight areas along a 40-mile stretch of the river between Salida and Cañon City.

Like all of their works of art, Over The River will be temporary. It will be exhibited for two weeks and is currently planned for the summer of 2012. After its exhibition, it will be taken down and the materials recycled for industrial uses.

This project is a wonderful opportunity for the upper Arkansas River Valley and for all of Colorado. For two weeks, the eyes of the world will be upon us. Thousands of visitors will come to see the exhibit, spending their money on hotels and restaurants in the valley and throughout the state. As much as \$195 million is projected to be spent in Colorado because of Over The River, yet — as with all Christo and Jeanne-Claude's previous works of art — the project will be entirely funded by the artists.

It is an artistic inspiration that will leave our state with a creative legacy, even though it is temporary. Imagine being able to raft down the river during Over The River and experiencing the Arkansas River as art, inspiring children to creative endeavors of their own.

In addition to experiencing first-hand the beauty of our region, visitors will also be introduced to the cultural and artistic amenities that our state has to offer, including the Sangre de Cristo Arts Center in Pueblo, the new addition to the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, Denver's new Museum of Contemporary Art, and the new Hamilton wing of the Denver Art Museum. Colorado is increasingly taking its place on the world's artistic stage, and Christo and Jeanne-Claude's Over The River will help cement our growing reputation for artistic and cultural excellence.

There are challenges to completing Over The River. Because of concerns over potential traffic, safety and environmental issues, the artists volunteered to conduct a comprehensive environmental impact statement. This process, which is to take up to two years to complete, will thoroughly examine all potential impacts and identify ways to mitigate them. The artists have an unwavering commitment to working with communities in the valley to ensure that Over The River is a positive and beneficial experience for Colorado. It is this same commitment that they have taken to every one of their other temporary works of art.

Because of that, many communities that were originally skeptical of their ideas came to embrace their works as a positive and beneficial experience.

We are exceedingly fortunate that Christo and Jeanne-Claude have selected Colorado, and I hope our state will get behind the work and lend it our enthusiastic support. It is an opportunity we are unlikely to see again.

Barbara O'Brien is lieutenant governor of Colorado.