GUEST COLUMN:

Pikes Peak Region's heritage of innovation and entrepreneurship

By: Walt Hecox

The Pikes Peak region's recreation and tourism industries remain a largely "hidden gem" of employment and economic diversification as well as a key determinant of our quality of life. While we discuss these industries frequently, we often overlook their historic origins, magnitude and ways they support our region's quality of life.

Recreation and tourism, elements that help diversify our economy, are key sectors of our three-county region. In 2014, recreation and tourism in El Paso, Teller and Fremont counties brought 5.2 million visitors, with direct travel spending of over $1.4 billion, and supported 14,800 jobs earning $344 million. Travel- and tourism-related employment is 17 percent of total private employment, with average wages in the sector ranging from $45,530 for passenger transportation to $17,025 for retail sales and restaurants. However, more than half of all overnight travel spending occurs in the Denver area. By region, 2014 shares are: Denver metro region, 51 percent; Mountain Resort region, 23 percent; Pikes Peak region, 8 percent (down from 9 percent in 2013); all other counties, 17 percent. The state had 33.6 million overnight visitors in 2014, 8 percent more than in 2013, according to the Colorado Tourism Office. Losing our "regional share" of total tourism in Colorado hurts. For instance, analysis shows that if in 2014 our region kept its 2013 share of 9 percent rather than slipping to 8 percent, the region would have received $46 million in additional tourist dollars.

Underpinning these direct economic dimensions lies the region's quality of life. It is vitally important to residents and visitors alike, yet it is difficult to measure. The Colorado Springs Regional Business Alliance rather broadly offers "quality of life" as a key ingredient for attracting and retaining employers and employees. The alliance goes on: "against a backdrop of some of America's most beautiful mountains sits a thriving community, rich in business experience, with a history replete with achievement. What sets Colorado Springs apart from most cities is the sense of being surrounded by nature in the middle of a metropolitan area."

Trying to quantify "quality of life" is slippery. In 2015, Springs Insight Exchange surveyed hundreds of respondents with an open-ended question about the three greatest strengths of the region. They found the region's natural beauty and opportunities for outdoor recreation was the most-cited strength of the region at over 55 percent of the respondents, with 15 percent more identifying the area's climate and weather.
We too often take for granted the rich recreation and tourism heritage of the Pikes Peak region as well as the resulting economic benefits and quality of life.

The origins of our uniqueness as a region and high quality of life stretch back decades and for most are now lost to history. Given their current and future importance to our recreation/tourism sector, we best become reacquainted. Gen. Palmer founded the city and pursued a "Little London" theme including the original Antlers hotel; recovery from pulmonary diseases and rail-based tourism further enhanced the region's economy. Spencer Penrose and his business associates grew rich on mining activity in Cripple Creek and other mineral developments, with Colorado Springs sharing heavily in the resulting wealth and business activity.

Penrose followed Palmer, and both realized that Pikes Peak itself served as a priceless natural competitive advantage.

By the mid-1920s, Penrose's scenic companies had a unifying theme: Pikes Peak. They included the Pikes Peak Highway, Cheyenne Mountain Highway, Pikes Peak Touring Co., Manitou Incline, Cog Railway, Crystal Park Toll Road and the Midland Terminal line to Cripple Creek. These enterprises individually were not very profitable but helped steer visitors to stay at The Broadmoor hotel and to this day have helped make the region unique.

After Penrose died in December 1939, the hotel and most of his businesses were operated as holdings of El Pomar Investment Co. This changed in 1988 when IRS rules required El Pomar sell a controlling interest of its commercial enterprises, and so over time the foundation sold controlling interest in The Broadmoor hotel to Edward Gaylord and his Oklahoma Publishing Co. Philip Anschutz purchased The Broadmoor hotel and associated attractions in 2011, revitalizing and consolidating the original Penrose dream around Pikes Peak.

If Gen. Palmer, then Penrose and the El Pomar Foundation and now Anschutz, our region's three world-renowned and shrewd entrepreneurs, can devote capital and effort to the region's recreation and tourism dimension, we are on sound footing in strengthening and expanding recreation and tourism as a vital dimension to our regional economy and prosperity.

Next-generation regional facilities and attractions are underway, continuing an eclectic mix of private entrepreneurs alongside public entities, using innovative approaches. They include: purchase and renovation of first the Mining Exchange Wyndham Grand Hotel complex and now The Antlers hotel, to recapture much of the original Gen. Palmer spirit; The Broadmoor hotel Wilderness Experience array of attractions including two Penrose legacies: Cloud Camp on top of Cheyenne Mountain and the Ranch at Emerald Valley and now the purchase and renovation of Seven Falls; design and construction of a new Summit House for Pikes Peak; Lyda Hill spearheading creation of the Garden of the Gods Foundation and its renovation of the Garden of the Gods Visitors Center; Dick Celeste championing the upcoming Olympic Museum and Hall of Fame; north Colorado Springs' new Renaissance Hotel and Water Park; work to finish the Legacy Loop Trail around downtown Colorado Springs as well as the Ring the Peak Trail concept. In addition, small businesses are sprouting up, acting as "outdoors entrepreneurs" who make a living connecting recreationists to nature, such as: Angler's Covey, Pikes Peak Paragliding, Challenge Unlimited: Pikes Peak by Bike.

Our region's natural resources and environment continue to make us unique "at the foot of Pikes Peak" and today are more important than ever. Innovation and entrepreneurial instincts can continue to drive a vital recreation-tourism dimension while nurturing economic diversity.

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