GUEST OPINION:

Mountain recreation is area's biggest drawing card for millennials

By: Garrett Mayberry and Walt Hecox

It's no surprise that Colorado Springs was recently chosen by Money magazine as the "Best in the Mountains." The city is beautiful. The climate is great. And the outdoor leisure and recreation opportunities are boundless. However, it isn't clear that everyone believes the hype.

Attracting and retaining millennials - the generation ages 18 to 33 - has been a topic of debate for years in Colorado Springs. City leaders, employers and colleges have been concerned the region doesn't offer the same level of opportunities geared toward young professionals as cities such as Denver and Boulder. Statistics show that's not necessarily the case.

In recent years, the growth of the millennial generation has increased in Colorado Springs; according to U.S. Census Bureau reports, 24 percent of the population represents that demographic. This is above the state average of 22 percent and the national average of 21 percent.

Second, millennials who live here seem to enjoy their lifestyle. Those who filled out a survey tied to the El Pomar Foundation's recent "Mountains Matter to Millennials" event ranked Colorado Springs their top choice among Front Range cities for desirability of living - over Pueblo, Boulder, Fort Collins and even Denver. So what makes this region a place where young professionals want to work, play and stay?

Our answer: the Pikes Peak mountain range and its vast opportunities for recreation and innovation are the most desirable assets in drawing millennials to the Pikes Peak region. We base this on results from over 250 respondents to our Pikes Peak Outdoors Leisure and Recreation Survey that helped shape a lively discussion by and about millennials in our region.

At the El Pomar Foundation's "Mountains Matter to Millennials" event Sept. 8, we asked more than 120 attendees how our region's natural assets can be best leveraged to attract young talent and improve quality of life in the region. Participants overwhelmingly recognized our region's outdoor assets and shared ideas such as attracting national festivals on outdoor recreation, developing a "go to" website and phone apps for "trail junkies" and bringing a grocery store to downtown Colorado Springs.
From this conversation, we have brought forward the following recommendations to assure opportunities for leisure and recreation are on solid ground and can act as a way to attract and retain even more millennials:

--- Invite millennials to the table. Our natural environment, more than anything, will be intractably altered by today's decisions. Emerging leaders must be included in conversations about outdoor access, development and stewardship.

--- Engage creatively. Cultivate the next generation of environmental stewards through experiences that capitalize on Colorado's cultural heritage. Upslope Brewery's recent "backcountry tap room," for example, attracted nearly 2,000 young beer-lovers to the White River National Forest for a one-day event.

--- Market our mountains. Brand the Pikes Peak region as hub of outdoor innovation and connect the Olympic City brand with what draws us here in the first place - a spirit of sport, adventure and the mountain massif.

--- Invest in urban renewal. Revitalized public spaces, smart redevelopment and urban trails will not only attract young workers but also help preserve the surroundings we all enjoy.

--- Take outdoor education to the next level. Colorado's Outdoor Recreation Industry Office is a testament to the sophistication and foresight of the state's outdoor sector. Our universities are perfectly poised to capitalize on this industry and offer new programs in outdoor recreation and entrepreneurship that prepare the next wave of industry leaders and environmental advocates.

At the end of the day, these recommendations offer a path forward, but they don't necessarily provide a rationale. We are a retired, liberal-leaning Colorado College academic and a conservative young professional partnering to bridge the generational and political gap to pursue a Pikes Peak vision.

If there's one thing working together on the Heritage Series program has shown us, it's that our mountain backdrop is not just a shared setting but a shared heritage. Here in Colorado, creativity and an entrepreneurial spirit are at the core of our DNA. That's why in spite of the apprehensions by and about millennials, we're united in our belief the future is in good hands.

Garrett Mayberry, a 2015 graduate of the University of Colorado at Boulder, is an El Pomar program associate, and Walt Hecox, a retired Colorado College economics professor, is senior program adviser; both are involved in the El Pomar Foundation's Pikes Peak Recreation & Tourism Heritage Series. For more information, go to www.elpomar.org/heritageseries.