

Time to break down the boundaries

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“The Pikes Peak region.” Has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?

In a single phrase we identify ourselves, and not-too-subtly remind other regions that we have Pikes Peak, and they don’t.

Would you rather live in the “Queen City of the Plains” (Denver), “The Asphalt Capital of America” (the fictitious Dacron, Ohio), the “Hog Butcher to the World” (Chicago) or the Pikes Peak region?

Of American cities and regions, only New Orleans (The Big Easy), New York (The Big Apple) and a great cult movie (“The Big Lebowski”) better identify themselves.

But for all its pleasant resonance, there’s something subjective and indefinite about the phrase.

How big is it? What are its boundaries? Who’s in, and who’s out? And why should any of this matter?

The great explorer John Wesley Powell, who led the first expedition down the Colorado River and through the Grand Canyon during the summer of 1869, believed that the West should be organized on the basis of watersheds and drainages, not upon arbitrary political subdivisions.

It was then, and is now, good advice - although universally ignored. Politicians love to establish boundaries, whether they make any sense or not.

Look at the map of Colorado. The state is defined by cartographic abstractions, by lines of latitude and longitude which correspond to no natural features. Like the 19th century European colonists who carved up Africa, the 19th century cartographers and politicians who created Colorado and its political subdivisions never considered the realities on the ground.

John Wesley Powell would, we’d like to think, have embraced the idea of the “Pikes Peak region.” It’s inclusive and natural, not just lines on a map. It includes Manitou Springs, Colorado Springs, Monument, Divide, Cripple Creek, Florence, Canon City, much of the Pike National Forest and all of the Beaver Creek wilderness study area, as well as dozens of other communities and sub-regions.

All of us have a shared interest in the health of the built and natural environment, in clean streams, healthy forests and in a strong regional economy.

Those interests intersect and overlap with those of the residents of adjacent regions, whether living in the high plains to the east, the Arkansas River Valley to the south or the middle Front Range to the north. By looking not at ideology, but geography, we can build collaborative relationships with our neighbors.

The long process that will culminate in the construction of Southern Delivery System from Pueblo Reservoir to Colorado Springs is a perfect example of such collaboration. Leaders in El Paso and Pueblo counties were able to work together in the interests of the entire region, and didn't merely pursue the parochial interests of their constituents.

They managed to end the "War between the Cities." They silenced the angry voices in both cities that had framed the issue in win-lose terms.

They saw what Powell saw so clearly 140 years ago when he emerged from the mouth of the Grand Canyon, three months after he launched his frail boats into Wyoming's Green River. In the West, geography is destiny, and those who ignore it do so at their own peril.

We succeed by being open and inclusive, so we'd like to offer a new definition of the Pikes Peak region: if you can see Pikes Peak, you're in it. That's a couple of hundred miles in every direction - and come to think of it, since we can see the Spanish Peaks from Colorado Springs, we're also in the Spanish Peaks region.

Which is just fine - it's never too late to build good relations with our neighbors, especially those who live next to Pinon Canyon.