



# THE RURAL LANDSCAPE INSTITUTE

A CATALYST FOR FOOD AND AGRICULTURAL INTEGRITY  
IN THE AMERICAN WEST

## LIVING EDEN

### *A 10-Step Community Guide to Good Neighboring*

As changes in land ownership spread across the state, we Montanans must acknowledge the trend and be proactive to preserve the community, culture, and landscape that make Montana truly Montana. *Living Eden* is a locally-initiated plan of action using the power of face-to-face conversation to develop rapport with newcomers. Our objective is “good neighboring” based on mutual respect and appreciation.

What follows is a 10-step process that you can use to engage a recent land purchaser – the **New Neighbor** – and welcome them into the community. When new landowners are invested in your community, there is greater opportunity to engage them in productive discussions of important local issues that relate to land ownership, such as noxious weeds, water rights, wildlife management, etc. By interacting with new landowners in a positive and productive way, you build mutually beneficial relationships that help preserve and enhance your community for the long term.

This process is not a sure-fire recipe, but merely a guideline. As such, you can, and should, modify it to suit the particular needs and interests of your community. We welcome your questions and feedback on any aspect of the process.

**The long term goal of *Living Eden* is to give new Montana landowners an opportunity to:**

- **feel welcome as a neighbor in their new community,**
- **appreciate the values that make being a Montanan special, and**
- **develop a sense of good stewardship for the landscape, the community and the local economy.**

### **STEP 1: Initiate *Living Eden***

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An active **Lead Organization** spearheads *Living Eden* within the community. For example, the Lead Organization could be a chamber of commerce, conservation district, service club, producer organization, or another local community-based group.

### **STEP 2: Form a Welcoming Committee**

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The Lead Organization creates a **Welcoming Committee**. The Welcoming Committee should consist of some of the Lead Organization's own members as well as other community members who are interested in sharing knowledge and insight with the New Neighbor. *Living Eden* will have greater success if the Welcoming Committee has a paid staff person to keep the process on track, as well as active volunteers who are committed to moving it along. The Welcoming Committee should be very familiar with *Living Eden* and its intent, goals, and suggested strategies of implementation, as well as essential communication techniques.

### **STEP 3: Contact Local Professionals**

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The Welcoming Committee compiles a list of **Local Professionals** – realtors, bankers, attorneys, insurance agents, veterinarians, etc. – who might have had contact with persons who have purchased property in the area. The Welcoming Committee would query Local Professionals for the names of these New Neighbors. They would also ask the Local Professional to contact the New Neighbor to briefly introduce the concept of *Living Eden* and ask permission for the Welcoming Committee to contact him/her. As *Living Eden* becomes more familiar within the community, it's possible that the Local Professional may have already discussed it with their client during earlier conversations, and even used it as a selling point.

The success of *Living Eden* depends a great deal on the initial contact with the New Neighbor. The sooner the welcoming process of *Living Eden* is initiated with the New Neighbor, the greater potential there is for overall success. That is why the involvement and support of Local Professionals in identifying New Neighbor candidates and introducing them to *Living Eden* is critical.

### **STEP 4: Designate a Point Person**

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The Welcoming Committee designates one of their members a **Point Person** to be the primary contact for the New Neighbor, providing information, education, and resources throughout the *Living Eden* process (and possibly for years to come). Ideally, the Point Person will be chosen based on information provided by the Local Professional regarding the New Neighbor's interests and priorities. For example, if the Local Professional knows that the New Neighbor is interested in habitat management for wildlife, the Welcoming Committee might choose a member who is a wildlife biologist to be the Point Person. Another good option for the Point Person is an adjacent landowner of the New Neighbor since they will certainly have related interests and concerns.

If your community has many New Neighbors, the Welcoming Committee should have a regular process for determining which ones are the highest priority for *Living Eden*. The Welcoming Committee should make an effort to interact with every New Neighbor, but, in very popular communities, it may not be possible to implement *Living Eden* for everyone in a timely manner. Some factors to consider include the New Neighbor's interests and priorities in the context of the community's interests and priorities.

### **STEP 5: Contact the New Neighbor**

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The Point Person contacts the New Neighbor, probably at the New Neighbor's current (non-local) address. The Local Professional should be able to provide this contact information, as well as ensure that the New Neighbor is expecting to be contacted. Communication can be by letter, email or phone. If by letter or email, mention that a phone call will follow. It is fair to assume that New Neighbors are very busy. However, if the contact is made promptly after their land purchase, and very soon after the Local Professional has introduced *Living Eden* to them, the New Neighbor will likely be more receptive. The Point Person should be persistent, but always patient, and never intrusive.

The conversation should be *brief, welcoming and to the point*. A few suggestions:

- Introduce yourself, reference *Living Eden* and the name of the Local Professional who provided the contact information.
- Ask if this is a good time to talk.
- Welcome them to the community.
- Briefly describe *Living Eden* in a friendly, clear way.
- Explain the roles of the Point Person and Welcoming Committee.
- Ask friendly questions that help discern the New Neighbor's interests, concerns and priorities regarding their new land purchase and community. For example, "How can we be of assistance to you?" or "Are there specific areas of interest where we could be of assistance?"
- Mention that you and the Welcoming Committee would like to host a **Welcoming Event** in their honor. Try to get a commitment for a date when they will next be at their property. Ideally, this should be as soon as possible to help keep *Living Eden* on track. Promise to follow up with more specific information regarding time, place, and invitees.
- Ask if there are any other questions and thank them for their time.

### **STEP 6: Evaluate the Initial Contact**

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The Point Person reports back to the Welcoming Committee with the results of their initial conversation with the New Neighbor. This includes an assessment of whether the New Neighbor was receptive to the goals of *Living Eden* during the initial conversation. Then, the Welcoming Committee discusses how best to proceed.

In the event that the New Neighbor was not receptive, the Local Professional should be contacted to get his/her input on the next step. The Committee might choose to make another contact, perhaps by a different Point Person, in the near or distant future. Another option might be to terminate the initiative with this particular New Neighbor and focus time and resources on other New Neighbors.

In most cases, it is assumed that the New Neighbor will be receptive to the idea. In that case, the Welcoming Committee and the Point Person plan the Welcoming Event.

### **STEP 7: Plan the Welcoming Event**

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The Welcoming Event is an informal get-together to welcome the New Neighbor to the community and introduce him/her to community members. It is a key opportunity to engage the New Neighbor and share with him/her the ideals, interests, and priorities that make the community special.

The venue for the Welcoming Event should be a comfortable environment for all invitees. For example, the Welcoming Event might be a barbeque at the Point Person's home, a tour of a ranch belonging to a member of the Welcoming Committee, or a reception at a public place within the community, such as a local restaurant.

The guest list might include members of the Lead Organization, the Welcoming Committee, the Local Professional who made the initial introduction, and, of course, the Point Person. The list might also include other members of the community who would be good **Local Resources** for the New Neighbor, such as his/her immediate neighbors, other Local Professionals, city officials, representatives of state and federal agencies, etc.

All invitees should be briefed ahead of time on the goals and process of *Living Eden* and be given information on the New Neighbor's background, interests, and priorities. In addition, a few pointers:

- Offer a welcome handshake to your New Neighbor.
- Invite the New Neighbor to tell his/her story.
- Be a good listener.
- Offer to share your local network of contacts that could be of assistance to your New Neighbor and make introductions as appropriate.
- Don't diminish the reasons that the New Neighbor is here.
- Remember that the point of this particular event is to build positive relationships, not lecture on your own personal agenda.
- Above all, treat your New Neighbor as you would like to be treated.

In general, New Neighbors may not "fit in" with our culture at first – they often don't talk like us, dress like us, think like us, or perhaps act like us – but that doesn't mean that they aren't going to be good neighbors. Consider how challenging it would be for one of us to blend into their community! With that in mind, from the very beginning we should give our New Neighbors a fair chance to be a part of our community. In addition, remember that our New Neighbors likely have the networks, expertise, and perspective that can be valuable assets to the community. That is why it's so important that we learn as much as possible about where *they* are coming from, and not worry (at least initially) about making sure they hear where *we're* coming from. This is a basic underlying principle of how to build active and cohesive communities.

Once the details of the Welcoming Event have been finalized, the Point Person contacts the New Neighbor with the information and reconfirms his/her commitment to attend. Give the New Neighbor a list of invitees in advance, including their roles in the *Living Eden* process (if applicable) and in the community, and possibly their contact information (to help the New Neighbor follow up after the Welcoming Event, if interested).

### **STEP 8: Hold the Welcoming Event**

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The Welcoming Event takes place. The Point Person acts as host, introducing the New Neighbor to the other guests and ensures that he/she feels welcome and is having a good time. Members of the Welcoming Committee can help ensure that the tone of the event remains informal and pleasant.

### **STEP 9: Follow Up**

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The Point Person contacts the New Neighbor to follow up on the success of the Welcoming Event. Did he/she feel welcome? Did he/she enjoy meeting anyone in particular? Did he/she discuss any topics of particular interest or learn anything new about the community? The goal of this conversation is to help determine the best next step. Ideally, the New Neighbor will be interested in attending other events or meetings. These can be formal or informal, with some of the same or different attendees. They can also focus on a particular topic which the New Neighbor might like to explore further.

The Point Person reports back to the Welcoming Committee. At this point, the Committee should have a good feel for the New Neighbor and it shouldn't be hard to determine how best to proceed. Regardless of what the next steps are, it is very important that the Point Person have ongoing contact with the New Neighbor to ensure that he/she continues to feel welcome, is given opportunities to become involved in the community, and feels that he/she has a good local resource for any questions or concerns.

If the New Neighbor has a ranch manager, the Point Person should offer to engage him/her in *Living Eden* as well – through regular phone contact, visits over coffee, invitations to social events, and the like. Since the ranch manager will be acting as the New Neighbor's ambassador when the New Neighbor is absent from the property, it is important to keep the ranch manager as involved in the community as the New Neighbor is.

### **STEP 10: Evaluate *Living Eden***

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The Welcoming Committee, with the assistance of the Point Person, Local Professional, and Local Resources who have had contact with the New Neighbor, evaluates the success of this particular *Living Eden* initiative. Consider whether it would be productive to include the New Neighbor in the discussion. Basic questions that should be addressed include: What worked? What didn't work? What can be improved? Based on the answers to these questions, the Welcoming Committee can adjust their *Living Eden* approach with the next New Neighbor.

A successful ongoing *Living Eden* program can have a positive effect on the entire community because residents will appreciate having New Neighbors who are informed, engaged, and respectful of the lifestyles that attracted them to the community in the first place. As such, the *Living Eden* process can be used as a selling point to attract the types of new landowners who will be good neighbors, and the character of the community will be preserved.

### **“PATH TO EDEN” DVD**

*Path to Eden*, a 26-minute DVD featuring Tom Brokaw, encourages new landowners to be good neighbors within their new community. Topics include Community, Ranch Manager Selection, Water Rights, Range Stewardship, Noxious Weeds, Wildlife Management, and Rural Values.

There are several opportunities during the *Living Eden* process when it would be appropriate to give a copy of the DVD to the New Neighbor and/or encourage them to watch it:

- Pre-STEP 1: When the Local Professional is first doing business with the potential New Neighbor
- STEP 3: When the Local Professional introduces the concept of *Living Eden* to the New Neighbor and requests permission for the Point Person to contact them
- STEP 6: When the Point Person makes the initial contact with the New Neighbor
- STEP 8: During the Welcoming Event
- STEP 9: During the Follow-Up process

**To order a free copy of the *Path to Eden* DVD, go to [www.pathtoeden.org](http://www.pathtoeden.org) or contact The Rural Landscape Institute.**

### **For More Information**

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We strongly encourage your questions and feedback about the *Living Eden* process to:

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