

RIO Task Force Meeting #3 – Meeting Minutes

July 15, 2025, at 7:00PM – Wellesley Town Hall, Great Hall

Task Force Members Present: Odessa Sanchez, Erin Riley, Marc Charney, Joan Minklei, Mary Kloppenberg, Sheri Kassirer, Heather Sawitsky, Mary Prosnitz, Tom Taylor, Peter Welburn, Kara Reinhardt Block, and Paul Criswell, Amy Gottschalk, Ed Chazen, Don Shepard.

Call to Order/Confirmation of Participants

The third meeting of the Wellesley RIO Task Force was called to order at 7:00 PM on Tuesday, July 15, 2025, in Great Hall, Town Hall. Chair Tom Taylor welcomed everyone to the hybrid meeting, noting that it was being broadcast live on Comcast 8 and Verizon 40, livestreamed on Wellesley Media, and recorded for later viewing.

Mr. Taylor noted the following Task Force members:

- Present in person were Odessa Sanchez, Erin Riley, Marc Charney, Joan Minklei, Mary Kloppenberg, Sheri Kassirer, Heather Sawitsky, Mary Prosnitz, Tom Taylor, Peter Welburn, Kara Reinhardt Block, and Paul Criswell, and present remotely via Zoom were Amy Gottschalk, Ed Chazen, and Don Shepard.
- Mr. Taylor noted the presence of Town Staff Brad Downey, Senior Planner, and Eric Arbeene, Planning Director.

Task Force Administration

Operating Principles Update

Mr. Welburn provided an update on the operating principles, noting that three main changes had been suggested at the previous meeting:

- Defining consensus as 11 out of 16 members (two-thirds)
- Leveraging the Advisory Committee's best practice of documenting both the positions of those in favor and those dissenting, along with their rationales
- Establishing a standard practice of receiving meeting materials in advance, with Friday before the meeting as the target date

The group was asked to notify Mr. Welburn of any additional suggestions after the meeting.

Task Force Meeting Schedule

Mr. Arbeene thanked everyone for completing the Doodle poll to coordinate meeting dates. He confirmed that the next meeting would be on Wednesday, August 13, 2025, at 7:00 PM, followed by Tuesday, September 9, 2025. Both meetings would be held in Great Hall with a hybrid format. He acknowledged the challenge of coordinating 16 people's schedules along with the availability of Great Hall and Wellesley Media.

RIO Bylaw Discussion

Overview/Discussion of Allowed Uses

Mr. Taylor explained that every section of the zoning bylaw specifies what uses are permitted in that district, and the RIO bylaw defines four permitted uses:

- Conventional multiunit dwelling units
- Assisted elderly living
- Independent elderly housing
- Nursing homes and skilled nursing facilities

Mr. Taylor noted that while reviewing the bylaw definitions, he identified some inconsistencies. The term "conventional units" is defined as "dwelling units available to the general public on the open market without price restrictions or consumer income limitations." However, when inclusionary zoning was added to the RIO bylaw three years ago, it required both conventional units and "assisted units" (affordable units). The bylaw language had not been updated to reflect this change.

Ms. Sawitsky pointed out that the terminology around elderly housing was also problematic and outdated. She explained that most assisted living facilities no longer include skilled nursing, which is being significantly downsized or eliminated in the industry, yet the current definition requires skilled nursing in some cases. She suggested that the definitions need educational updates to match current industry practices if the town wants to encourage more elderly housing.

Mr. Criswell asked for clarification on whether retail or commercial uses were permitted in RIO developments. Mr. Arbeene confirmed that only the four residential uses are permitted. Mr. Charney added that if the underlying zoning of a property permits mixed use, a RIO overlay could potentially be applied to allow higher residential density while maintaining commercial use on the first floor.

Mr. Taylor noted that there was no specific definition of "multiunit" in the bylaw, creating another area for potential cleanup.

Overview/Discussion of "Close Proximity" as noted in Section 3.2.A

Mr. Taylor explained that the purpose statement of the RIO bylaw requires parcels to be "located in close proximity to the town's commercial districts and public transportation." This requirement was added in 2019 and was not in the original RIO bylaw.

The discussion addressed several aspects of the proximity requirement:

- Definition of "commercial districts" - The bylaw refers to business districts, business A districts, industrial, industrial A, Lower Falls, and Wellesley Square commercial district.
- What "close proximity" means – Mr. Taylor noted that while not specifically defined in the Wellesley bylaw, recent state initiatives like the MBTA community project and model ADU bylaw both used a half-mile distance as a benchmark.
- Method of measurement – Ms. Minklei raised the question of whether distance should be measured "as the crow flies" or by walking distance. Taylor explained that the MBTA community law used "as the crow flies" despite potential practical issues, citing the example of Wellesley Office Park being within a half-mile of the Waban green line stop but requiring a mile-long walk to actually reach it.
- Public transportation definition - The task force discussed the reliability issues with various transportation options. Ms. Minklei provided information about the MWRTA bus service, noting that routes change over time and have limited stops. She questioned whether Catch Connect (the town's on-demand service) should qualify as public transportation given its unreliability and limitations.

The group debated several problems with the current proximity requirement:

- Ms. Prosnitz suggested eliminating the public transportation aspect entirely, given the unreliability of bus service in Wellesley.
- Mr. Shepherd proposed developing a point system that would weigh various desirable characteristics rather than setting arbitrary distance requirements.
- Mr. Criswell noted that precise definitions become arbitrary at the boundaries and suggested developing criteria that planning boards would need to articulate when making decisions.
- Mr. Chazen and Ms. Gottschalk emphasized that walkability considerations should include the quality and safety of the routes, not just distance.
- Ms. Reinhardt Block pointed out that the quality of commercial districts varies significantly, affecting the value of proximity to residents.

Mr. Taylor noted that the language in the bylaw uses "and" between commercial districts and public transportation, raising the question of whether developments need to meet both criteria or just one.

The task force also reviewed the original purpose section of the RIO bylaw, which focused on three conditions:

- Site conditions that impede long-term commercial or industrial use
- Parcels bordering residential districts where residential reuse would complement the neighborhood
- Parcels bordering natural features, open space, or historic resources that would be better preserved through residential use

Several members emphasized the need for a broader vision for housing in Wellesley. Mr. Welburn suggested discussing the Strategic Housing Plan at a future meeting to help inform how the RIO should support long-term housing goals.

Overview of Minimum Lot or Building Site Area

Mr. Taylor identified inconsistencies in the lot size requirements in the current bylaw:

- Section A states "parcel or parcels greater than 1 acre"
- Section E states "no building or development site containing less than 45,000 square feet" (an acre is 43,560 square feet)

The original bylaw required 2 acres for new construction but allowed conversion of existing buildings on lots as small as 25,000 square feet.

Other lot requirements discussed included:

- Open space requirement of 30% of the lot area
- Enhanced open space requirement of at least 15% (half of the total open space)

Mr. Arbeene explained the setback requirements for RIOs:

- Front yard: 25 feet
- Side yard: 10 feet
- Rear yard: 10 feet
- When abutting a residential district: 60 feet

Mr. Welburn noted that before the Bristol and Terraza projects, the setbacks were more restrictive at 25 feet (front), 40 feet (side), and 40 feet (rear).

Mr. Chazen expressed concern that the current setback requirements might be overly restrictive and prevent row house-style designs that could create a more neighborhood feel. He cited the apartments at Woodland Station as a successful example of mixing architectural styles.

The discussion concluded with several members noting the need to consider form-based code approaches that could provide more flexibility while ensuring developments fit the character of Wellesley.

Task Force Chair Updates

Mr. Taylor noted that meeting minutes would be prepared for review and approval at future meetings.

Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 9:00 PM.