

RIO Task Force Meeting #5 – Meeting Minutes

September 9, 2025, at 7:00PM – Wellesley Town Hall, Great Hall

Task Members Present: Erin Reilly, Amy Gottschalk, Joan Minklei, Marc Charney, Mary Prosnitz, Mary Kloppenborg, Paul Criswell, Heather Sawitsky, Tom Taylor, Joe Hassell, Kara Reinhardt Block, Sheri Kassirer, Edward Chazen, Odessa Sanchez.

Call to Order/Confirmation of Participants

Chair Tom Taylor called the meeting to order and welcomed everyone to the fifth meeting of the Wellesley RIO Task Force. He noted that the meeting was being broadcast on Comcast 9 and Verizon 39 and also streaming live on Wellesley Media for later viewing.

Mr. Taylor confirmed the following participants:

- Task Force members Erin Rielly and Amy Gottschalk joining remotely, with Joan Minklei, Marc Charney, Mary Prosnitz, Mary Kloppenborg, Paul Criswell, Heather Sawitsky, Joe Hassell, Kara Reinhardt Block, Sheri Kassirer, Edward Chazen, Odessa Sanchez, and himself, Tom Taylor.
- Senior Planner, Brad Downey, and Planning Director, Eric Arbeene, joining from Planning Department Staff.

Mr. Taylor noted that member Peter Wellburn may join remotely from a plane.

Citizen Speak on Matters Related to the Residential Incentive Overlay Zoning Bylaw

Mr. Taylor explained that this was the first time the Task Force had included citizen speak on the agenda as this is the first time potential changes to the RIO bylaw may be discussed by the Task Force. He allocated 30 minutes for public comments, with each speaker given 3 minutes, though noted it would be primarily a listening session rather than a discussion between the Task Force and the resident speaking.

One attendee who was observing the meeting in person noted that he was not prepared to speak but was simply there to observe the meeting. Mr. Downey checked the conference line and confirmed no callers were waiting to speak.

Approval of Meeting Minutes – 7/15/25 & 8/13/25

The task force reviewed the minutes from July 15 and August 13 meetings.

For the July 15 minutes, Ms. Reinhardt Block noted that Ms. Reilly's name needed to be corrected (spelling: "R-E-I-L-L-Y"). Mr. Taylor suggested a clarification regarding the definition of consensus, whether it should be defined as two-thirds of members present rather than 11 out of 16 members, or two-thirds of the full body.

For the August 13 minutes, Ms. Reinhardt Block noted that a point made by Mr. Chazen about floor area ratio was not adequately reflected in the minutes.

Mr. Criswell motioned in the words of the chair a vote to approve the minutes of July 15 and August 13, 2025, with the edits as mentioned by Ms. Reinhardt Block and Mr. Taylor. Ms. Kloppenborg seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously, 14-0.

Bylaw Discussion:

a) Section A: Purpose

Mr. Taylor introduced the purpose statement discussion, explaining that the original RIO had a specific purpose statement written for the problem at hand in 1998. The purpose was substantially changed when the bylaw was

rewritten in 2019. He noted that after reviewing numerous other zoning bylaws, it seemed logical to start with purpose statements.

Several task force members presented their ideas for a purpose statement:

Mr. Taylor felt that the primary purpose of RIO should be to create an overlay district that encourages the development of housing at a scale, density, and aesthetic that are compatible with existing surrounding uses to contribute to housing diversity and housing affordability of the town. He emphasized that the purpose statement should focus on the "why" rather than the details, which would be defined elsewhere in the bylaw. He also suggested several subsidiary objectives including placing housing near commercial districts to increase customer base for local business and near town amenities, and transportation to reduce car dependence, adding public amenities, and considering environmentally sound construction, which may be covered by the building code. Mr. Taylor intentionally used less-specific terms like "encourage" and "compatible" to provide flexibility. He also noted that one of the goals of the bylaw is to provide housing for seniors. He noted that he interpreted compatibility and "possible uses" for land as compatible with what is allowed in each zoning district rather than what currently exists on any given site.

Mr. Chazen focused on establishing clear guidelines to reduce uncertainty for developers and anxiety for residents, making the permitting process less contentious. He emphasized opposition is among the greatest risk, but listening to stakeholders and showing examples of successful developments from communities similar to Wellesley should be prioritized. He referenced "The Nines" as a successful high-density development away from already congested areas like Washington Street and Walnut Street.

Ms. Reilly approached the purpose from a more humanistic perspective, focusing on the people who would benefit from diverse housing rather than just the buildings themselves. She emphasized creating housing for a broader range of people including those in various life stages and income levels, such as artists, people in trades, nurses, and others who contribute to the community but may not be able to afford current housing prices in the region, let alone Wellesley.

A brief discussion followed on demand for workforce housing and inclusionary zoning requirements to promote housing options for residents of varying socio-economic status.

Mr. Chazen noted that most opposition to RIO is less about the zoning itself, but the location of the zoning.

Mr. Hassell emphasized "progress" as his key concept, noting how zoning has evolved over time in Wellesley. He focused on facilitating diverse housing stock and economic growth for the town, with emphasis on suitable locations that have appropriate infrastructure support. He acknowledged risks including opposition, perceived property devaluation, traffic concerns, and neighborhood character change, but stressed the importance of modernizing the code to achieve current and future town goals.

Ms. Prosnitz highlighted the importance of redevelopment of existing structures for environmental reasons, focusing on reusing buildings and land rather than developing existing open space. She emphasized different life-cycle housing needs, walkability, and the importance of considering architectural and aesthetic character. She suggested using schools as community centers and proposed creative visualization tools to help residents understand potential changes.

Ms. Kassirer stated that RIO should take advantage of real estate opportunities that otherwise would not be possible through current zoning rules in order to provide more housing options for different life stages, increase affordable housing, and guide growth in appropriate areas. She highlighted the importance of fostering a diverse community that bridges racial, generational, and socio-economic barriers. She noted that African Americans represent only 1.7% of Wellesley's population (and declining), contrasting with demographic projections showing people of color becoming a majority nationally by 2040. She noted Massachusetts' housing crisis and resulting homelessness, and suggested setting specific targets for housing units to be built over time.

Ms. Minklei presented research based on American Enterprise Institute data.

Ms. Sanchez responded to Ms. Kassirer's comments on Wellesley's racial diversity and homelessness, noting that additional housing units are available to everyone, not just African Americans, so additional work would be required to attract racial diversity. She also noted the risks of gentrification.

Mr. Criswell focused on the procedural aspects of the bylaw based on his experience at Town Meeting. He felt the purpose of the RIO bylaw is to enable the development and construction of multi-family housing units in an area where they are otherwise not allowed to exist. He stresses the importance of having future developments

meet Town goals for multi-family housing development. He suggested developing evaluation criteria for RIO proposals to ensure they meet Town goals, to be promulgated by the Planning Board.

Ms. Gottschalk arrived to the meeting in-person at approximately 8:15PM.

Ms. Minklei proposed that the RIO has outlived its usefulness and no longer serves a distinct purpose given the town's as-of-right multi-unit housing zoning districts and the MBTA Communities Act. She suggested that eliminating RIO would streamline zoning bylaws, reduce redundancy, and provide more clarity and certainty. She claimed that Wellesley already has 800-1000 additional approved units in the pipeline, but the Town is only obligated to build an additional 664 units.

Mr. Charney suggested removing single-family districts from the RIO Bylaw, which would significantly narrow its scope but potentially address many concerns. He acknowledged the value of the discussion but expressed concern about the timeline, hoping to get proposals to Annual Town Meeting 2026. He mentioned that Wellesley's zoning bylaw needs complete recodification, with RIO being just one small component.

Ms. Gottschalk agreed with Ms. Minklei's idea that the RIO may have outlived its purpose, noting that RIO requires a rezoning process and other zoning tools exist. She suggested that instead of piecemeal RIO approvals, the town should consider changing zoning to planned development in areas like Lower Falls. She emphasized the need for comprehensive planning with input from residents.

Ms. Kloppenberg noted goals focusing on fostering community understanding of Wellesley's unique zoning requirements, supporting planning goals for housing (including access to transportation, shopping, schools, and work), and recognizing implications of changes on neighborhoods and traffic patterns. She emphasizes the importance of community education on housing and zoning.

Ms. Sawitsky stressed the need for education of town meeting members and other community members to develop a shared vision. She agreed with Mr. Charney that eliminating some areas from RIO consideration might help reduce fears. She highlighted the importance of senior housing and suggested creative approaches like placing senior housing near schools for potential synergies.

Ms. Minklei commented on senior housing trends, noting that baby boomers increasingly prefer to remain in their homes and in mixed multi-generational communities rather than dedicated senior facilities, though she acknowledged Wellesley has good examples like Wellesley Green and Glen Grove. She noted that siting senior housing facilities near schools may not be appropriate.

Ms. Reinhardt Block noted that few "workforce" households still exist in her neighborhood. She suggested the Town should prioritize the needs of current residents over the needs of future residents and felt that following permitting projects was too onerous for residents. She noted that zoning provides other avenues to create multi-family housing.

Ms. Sanchez emphasized creating distinctive neighborhood identities through RIO, encouraging mixed usage and business diversity. She referenced examples like Coolidge Corner, Brookline Village, and the South End as places where unique housing coexists with mixed-use development that revitalizes neighborhoods. She suggested updating dimensional regulations, permit reform, and partnerships to meet sustainability goals.

Mr. Arbeene said that Planning Department staff will prepare a document summarizing the thoughts of the Task Force members and distribute it to the group prior to the next meeting.

Mr. Arbeene reviewed the zoning maps and supplementary zoning district information that Planning Department staff prepared for the Task Force. A brief discussion followed on zoning districts in town where by-right multi-family housing can be built.

Task Force Chair Updates

Preview Agenda for Next Meeting

Mr. Taylor discussed plans for the next meeting. There was discussion about a potential additional meeting on September 30. Mr. Arbeene noted that this date worked for most task force members based on a Doodle poll, but staff would investigate alternatives.

There was a discussion to plan for a joint meeting of the RIO Task Force and the Planning Board to hear the Planning Board members' thoughts. Mr. Arbeene noted upcoming Planning Board meeting dates of September 29, October 6, or October 20, which may be suitable for a joint meeting.

Mr. Arbeene provided an update on the Strategic Housing Plan, noting they were unable to get the consultant to attend a Task Force meeting, but encouraged members to review the draft document. He and Mr. Taylor noted that a discussion of the Strategic Housing Plan, while potentially valuable, may conflate the charge of the RIO Task Force into something beyond its scope.

Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 9:15 PM.

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