

RIO Task Force Meeting #4 – Meeting Minutes

August 13, 2025, at 7:00PM – Wellesley Town Hall, Great Hall

Task Force Members Present: Marc Charney, Ed Chazen, Joe Hassell, Mary Kloppenberg, Amy Gottschalk, Odessa Sanchez, Tom Taylor, Peter Welburn, Kara Reinhardt Block, Heather Sawitsky, Paul Criswell, Mary Prosnitz, Don Shepard, Erin Reilly.

Call to Order/Confirmation of Participants

Chair Tom Taylor called the fourth meeting of the Wellesley RIO Task Force to order. The meeting was held in a hybrid format with most members present in the Great Hall at Town Hall and one member joining remotely.

Mr. Taylor noted Task Force members present in the Great Hall included Marc Charney, Ed Chazen, Joe Hassell, Mary Kloppenberg, Amy Gottschalk, Odessa Sanchez, Tom Taylor, Peter Welburn, Kara Reinhardt Block, Heather Sawitsky, Paul Criswell, and Mary Prosnitz. Don Shepard was in attendance remotely via Zoom.

Eric Arbeene, Planning Director, Brad Downey, Senior Planner, and Sheila Page, Transportation and Mobility Manager, were also present.

Task Force Administration

Operating Principles Update

Mr. Arbeene reviewed the updated RIO Task Force Operating Principles that were first discussed at a previous meeting. The principles included:

- Treat each other with respect
- Hold ourselves and each other accountable by following through on commitments and taking responsibility
- Start and end meetings on time (2 hours)
- Engage with other town boards as appropriate (e.g., Planning Board)
- Seek a broad consensus (at least two-thirds of members agree on recommendations)
- Communicate proactively and directly
- Hold meetings in public
- Include dissenting opinions in the final recommendation
- Task Force members must be present at the meeting (either in person or on Zoom) to vote on the final recommendation

Mr. Welburn recalled that the recommendation for Principle #8 was to include commentary on both sides (pro and con), similar to Advisory Committee reports. He mentioned this was a helpful best practice when reading Advisory reports.

Ms. Reinhardt Block noted that the Advisory Committee had discussed in a recent meeting that dissenting opinions should occupy space proportional to their gravity rather than proportional to the vote count. She suggested that the task force should follow this approach.

Ms. Sanchez moved that the Task Force accept the operating principles as listed with the additional principles as shown. Ms. Kloppenberg seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

Meeting Minutes for 6/11/25 & 6/18/25

The Task Force reviewed the minutes from its first two meetings held on June 11, 2025, and June 18, 2025. Several corrections were suggested:

For the June 11 meeting:

- Ms. Reinhardt Block recommended separating Task Force members from the Select Board liaison in the participants list. Ms. Kloppenberg was noted as joining remotely and should be included in the list.
- Ms. Reinhardt Block arrived late but noted she was not listed with the rest of the participants, and her entrance was noted later on in the minutes. She and Mr. Taylor suggested instead listing all participants together regardless of when they joined the meeting.
- Ms. Reinhardt Block requesting confirmation that the minutes captured the definition of quorum as said by Mr. Dively during discussion on Open Meeting Law.
- Correction to the spelling of Ms. Reinhardt Block's last name (HARDT)
- Suggested change to a comment Mr. Arbeene made regarding housing in non-residential districts
- Clarification that Wellesley has 26 distinct zoning districts plus 8 overlay districts

For the June 18 meeting:

- Clarification that the discussion about a two-thirds majority referred to requirements at Town Meeting, not for the task force
- Correction to indicate meeting materials are available on the Planning Department website, not the Planning Board website

Mr. Criswell motioned to accept the minutes as commented on during the meeting by Mr. Taylor and Ms. Reinhardt Block. The motion was seconded by Ms. Sanchez and passed unanimously by a show of hands.

Public Transportation Overview

Mr. Arbeene introduced Ms. Page, the town's Transportation and Mobility Manager, who provided an overview of public transportation in Wellesley.

Ms. Page explained that public transportation includes buses, trains, vans, and ferries available to the public, typically charging fares and often subsidized by the federal government. Public transportation follows specific federal guidelines regarding safety and non-discrimination. In addition to serving the public, public transportation has environmental benefits. She gave an overview of car ownership statistics.

Ms. Page highlighted Wellesley's Commuter Rail Line options. Wellesley has three stops, with service approximately every 45 minutes. Wellesley Square is the busiest station with over 1,000 riders per weekday. Station improvements are planned, with full accessibility upgrades anticipated around 2033-2035.

Wellesley is also serviced by the MetroWest Regional Transit Authority (MWRTA), which includes the following services:

- Route 1 Bus: Runs from Natick Mall through Wellesley Square to Babson College, Mass Bay, and Woodland. Operates seven days a week with truncated weekend service). In the first six months of the year, 17,000 riders used this route, with 7,000 boarding or alighting in Wellesley. Uses a flag-down system in less dense areas.
- Catch Connect: A shared on-demand service that provides rides anywhere in Wellesley and to selected nearby destinations, such as Woodland T Stop and Babson College. It operates Monday-Friday with monthly ridership ranging from 1,200 to 4,300.
- Hospital Shuttle: Available to the public, provides transportation from Wellesley to Boston VA hospitals. Operates Tuesday-Thursday from 8:30 AM to 6:00 PM with required reservations.
- Paratransit: For people with qualifying medical issues.

Sheila noted that MWRTA continually adapts to demand, recently purchasing six new buses and considering sign stops instead of flag-down service as demand increases. She emphasized that anyone experiencing issues with the service should contact MWRTA customer service directly.

During the discussion, several questions and concerns were raised:

Mr. Chazen asked if these services could be expanded to serve multifamily developments along Route 9, particularly near locations like the Cedar Street/Route 9 intersection, or whether the services can be used to

bring residents to popular shopping destinations in town. Ms. Page confirmed that MWRTA is responsive to demand and would consider route adjustments or additions based on development patterns.

Mr. Criswell inquired about MWRTA's funding structure and governance. Ms. Page explained it is a public agency that receives state and federal funding, with additional assessments paid by member towns. Each town has a representative on the advisory board that oversees the agency. Catch Connect is a service provided by MWRTA.

Ms. Gottschalk asked about ridership demographics, noting that many of the rides originate from Babson College. Ms. Page provided additional information on available data demonstrating where rides typically originate from, and who is typically served.

Ms. Sanchez emphasized that car ownership statistics don't fully capture transportation needs, as many households have members who cannot drive or don't have access to the family car when needed. She also noted that colleges in town typically provide their own shuttle services and Wellesley residents may not be served as well as they could. There was further discussion on the relationship between the colleges and the Catch Connect and how that affects the ability of Wellesley residents to take full advantage of that service.

Ms. Page provided examples from Lexington and Needham of transportation districts in which developers were able to contribute to a fund to improve transportation within that district in lieu of providing their own transportation improvements or amenities. She also noted various approaches including transportation funds and maximum parking requirements with fees for additional spaces.

Mr. Welburn commented about the number of personal vehicles residents own in town. He also asked about town payments for Catch Connect and expressed concern about the impact of additional multifamily housing on traffic. Ms. Page noted that the town pays an assessment to MWRTA based on population, not specifically for Catch Connect. She notes that there is a general interest in reducing the number of private vehicles across the region.

Ed Chazen noted that several communities around Boston are reducing parking requirements for new developments, citing examples in Newton and Needham of large, successful apartment complexes with less than one parking space per unit.

Mr. Hassell notes that parking often depends on who the potential residents will be. Older generations prefer private vehicles and additional parking areas, where younger generations prefer mobility and walkability.

Ms. Sanchez commented on the transportation services of Needham, which is part of the MBTA, where Wellesley is part of the MWRTA.

Mr. Arbeene noted that Ms. Reilly joined the meeting virtually at 7:35 and read aloud her comment reflecting on other college shuttle services.

Mr. Chazen and Ms. Gottschalk noted that if the Catch Connect is not reliable or punctual, it will discourage residents from using it.

Mr. Criswell asked about customer satisfaction data. Ms. Page will look to see if that data is available.

RIO Bylaw Discussion

Overview/Discussion of Building Height

Mr. Taylor reviewed the current building height requirements under the RIO bylaw. He noted that in commercial districts (except Wellesley Square) the maximum height allowed is 4 stories and 45 feet for assisted living, independent elderly housing, and conventional multi-housing. In single residence and general residence districts the maximum height is 3 stories and 36 feet for the same housing types. For nursing homes and skilled nursing facilities, regardless of location, 3 stories and 36 feet is the maximum allowable height.

A discussion ensued about how height requirements apply to parcels split between different zoning districts. Mr. Arbeene explained that Wellesley maintains a "hard line" between districts, meaning requirements change at the zoning boundary line even within the same parcel.

Ms. Reinhardt Block noted that the RIO approved at Worcester and Cedar Street is an example of a split-zone lot where different height requirements apply to different portions of the project.

Mr. Arbeene briefly described the concept of Floor Area Ratio, which Mr. Taylor noted does not apply to this bylaw. Mr. Chazen noted that Floor Area Ratio is classic measure of development density and it would be helpful to provide a Floor Area Ratio to developers. Mr. Arbeene notes Floor Area Ratio applies to other zoning districts. Mr. Charney noted standardizing Floor Area Ratio in the zoning bylaw may provide more consistent guidelines, an idea with which Mr. Chazen agreed.

Overview/Discussion District Eligibility & Density

Mr. Taylor reviewed the current density standards in the RIO bylaw:

- For assisted elderly living or independent living: 1,400 square feet per unit (equivalent to 31 units per acre)
- For conventional multi-unit housing: 1,800 square feet per unit (equivalent to 24 units per acre)
- Nursing homes and skilled nursing facilities don't have a density metric but are limited by the number of total beds, 250 per site

Mr. Taylor suggested considering variable density in different underlying zoning districts rather than a single number for the entire town. He proposed that different density standards might make projects more acceptable in certain areas, such as the recently rejected Washington Court, which might have been more acceptable if a lower density was required over the SR-10 district.

Ms. Gottschalk noted that she had difficulty finding specific references to units per acre for single-family districts in the zoning bylaw. Mr. Arbeene explained that these figures are derived by dividing an acre (43,560 square feet) by the minimum lot size requirement, rather than being explicitly stated in the bylaw.

Mr. Chazen expressed support for variable density and asked if this might include variations in height and bulk within a district to reduce monotony in development.

Ms. Reinhardt Block emphasized that design considerations are critical, noting that the 2019 revision removed language requiring buildings to be contiguous with surrounding area characteristics. She suggested that addressing design concerns might help allay community concerns about size and bulk.

Mr. Charney suggested considering design guidelines that could offer developers a palette of acceptable designs to choose from, making the approval process more predictable for all stakeholders.

Mr. Hassell emphasized the need to think about housing needs for the next decade, particularly noting the importance of senior living options which could free up existing housing stock. He mentioned a 5-acre site on Route 9 that would be perfect for senior housing but is constrained by current density limitations.

Mr. Welburn stressed the importance of clearly defining the purpose of the RIO, noting that the original intent was to extend residential housing into commercial districts where appropriate. He expressed concern that the 2019 change allowing RIOs in any district has caused tension with neighbors in single-family districts.

There was a discussion on other methods of producing housing, and the frequency of homes being demolished and rebuilt.

Ms. Prosnitz suggests that the community base zoning on what it would like to see in town, developing and applying overlay districts without interest from developers, rather shape zoning to make development easier. Mr. Charney agreed, considering community visioning for areas of potential future development, such as Lower Falls.

Mr. Criswell notes housing production can tend to be top-down where the Planning Board directs development. Unless the community is involved earlier in the process to inform the developer of what they would like to see in town, the project may not be approved. A more bottom-up approach would be valuable in getting projects through Town Meeting.

Ms. Gottschalk notes that areas that may not be ripe for development, such as the Wellesley Country Club, are captured in data about residential parcels in town in a way she felt misleading.

Mr. Taylor noted he did not see any overlay districts in peer communities that were restricted in the base zoning districts onto which they could be applied. He considered that other communities allow more license to the Town Meeting to determine whether a proposed development is appropriate.

Mr. Taylor suggested Task Force members review Signs and Off-Street Parking sections of the RIO bylaw and greater Zoning Bylaw independently.

Task Force Chair Updates

Mr. Taylor discussed how the task force should proceed with its work:

- The next meeting on September 9 will begin discussions on potential changes to the RIO bylaw. The Task Force may also review the Strategic Housing Plan at that meeting.
- The Task Force will consider adding Citizen Speak opportunities at future meetings, likely starting after the September meeting, with an initial allocation of 30 minutes for speakers (10 speakers at 3 minutes each).
- Additional meetings will be needed beyond the currently scheduled dates (September 9, October 13, November 18, and December 16). A doodle poll will be sent to identify potential additional dates in September/October.
- A joint meeting with the Planning Board will be arranged, likely in October, to allow for exchange of ideas.
- The task force needs to complete its work in time for the Town Meeting warrant, which closes just before Christmas. Public hearings would need to be conducted by February.

There was discussion about how to share ideas and proposals for RIO changes. Mr. Criswell considered a vote should be reserved for a 'package' of suggested changes, rather vote on individual changes. Mr. Arbeene clarified that per Town Counsel's guidance, deliberations must occur during public meetings, and materials cannot be circulated to the board before meetings as that would constitute deliberation.

Several members expressed interest in having a comprehensive understanding of all available housing tools and current zoning before proposing specific RIO changes and agreed reviewing the Strategic Housing Plan would be valuable.

There was further discussion on the anticipated joint meeting between the RIO Task Force and the Planning Board.

Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 9:50 PM.