

RIO Task Force Meeting #6 – Meeting Minutes

October 16, 2025, at 7:00PM – Wellesley Town Hall, Great Hall

Task Members Present: Erin Reilly, Ed Chazen, Don Shepard, Amy Gottschalk, Mary Kloppenberg, Tom Taylor, Peter Welburn, Paul Criswell, Mary Prosnitz, Marc Charney, Kara Reinhardt Block

Task Members Absent: Joe Hassell, Sheri Kassirer, Joan Minklei, Odessa Sanchez, Heather Sawitsky

Call to Order/Confirmation of Participants

The meeting was called to order by Chair Mr. Taylor. He noted they were meeting in hybrid format in the Great Hall at Town Hall, with some members attending remotely. Present in person were Mr. Shepard, Ms. Gottschalk, Ms. Kloppenberg, Mr. Taylor, Mr. Welburn, Mr. Criswell, Ms. Prosnitz, and Mr. Charney, who joined shortly after the meeting started. Participating remotely were Mr. Chazen and Ms. Reilly. Also in attendance were Mr. Downey, Senior Planner, and Mr. Arbeene, Planning Director.

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

The Chair confirmed there was no one on the conference line or in attendance who wished to speak.

Approval of Meeting Minutes – 9/9/25

Mr. Welburn requested two corrections to the minutes. First, he noted his name was misspelled and should be "Welburn" with one "l" rather than two. Second, he suggested attaching the one-slide summaries that speakers had presented.

Staff indicated they had prepared a summary of everyone's comments from the previous meeting which incorporated input from members who were unable to attend, including Mr. Welburn and Mr. Shepherd. Due to Open Meeting Law concerns, this document could not be distributed in advance of the meeting but would now be made available to the task force and could be posted on the website.

Ms. Reilly noted that she had submitted her comments in paragraph form rather than slides, and staff confirmed this would be included in an appendix to the minutes as well.

Mr. Arbeene noted a change on behalf of Ms. Minklei, regarding a statement she made, changing "claiming 800 to a thousand units were in the pipeline" to "stated 800 to a thousand units are in various parts of the pipeline."

Mr. Criswell motioned to approve the minutes with the edits suggested by Mr. Arbeene and Mr. Welburn, and with the appendix of member 'homework' slides as submitted. Ms. Kloppenberg seconded. The vote passed unanimously, 9-0.

Review/Wrap-Up Discussion on RIO Purpose

Mr. Welburn presented his views on the RIO purpose, noting key points. He stressed the importance of supporting the development of different housing types to meet town needs while preserving Wellesley's unique character, focusing multifamily housing in commercial and business districts, particularly near transportation hubs, expressing concern about neighborhood pushback and traffic, citing the current MassBay proposal for 180 units as an example of community stress.

Mr. Welburn suggested the Planning Board and Town consider enhanced community engagement in development processes, partnering with architects to create pre-designed, community-approved templates for RIO developments, and implementing development agreements as part of the RIO process

Mr. Shepard expanded on his thoughts regarding mitigation strategies. He advocated for independent, developer-funded traffic studies at the earliest stages of zoning discussions to provide objective data. He also suggested requiring developments to provide amenities such as playgrounds, decorative sidewalks, walking trails, bike paths, and recreational spaces that would benefit both residents of the new development and neighbors, making properties more attractive to potential developers while giving neighbors tangible benefits to supporting development.

Mr. Taylor notes that the existing RIO bylaw does include language on the requirement of special amenities and enhanced open space on the project development site.

RIO Discussion Questions – Four Scenarios

Mr. Taylor explained the approach for discussing four "statements of change" to spur discussion. He emphasized they were not recommendations, but conversation starters to explore the gray areas between different viewpoints. The goal was to discuss the pros and cons of each statement.

a) Elimination of RIO Bylaw

The first statement presented was: "Wellesley should completely eliminate the Residential Incentive Overlay (RIO) bylaw from the zoning bylaw."

Ms. Gottschalk spoke first, supporting elimination. She stated that the RIO was created in the late 1990s for a specific purpose and questioned what benefit it provided, aside from increased density, beyond the 17 units/acre that existing zoning allows. She argued that, as it related to MBTA zoning, the state requires 15 units/acre and the town, by allowing 17 units/acre in Industrial and Commercial districts, goes above and beyond what the state requires under the MBTA law. Mr. Arbeene and Mr. Taylor provided additional background on the genesis of the RIO.

Mr. Criswell disagreed, arguing that the RIO is a valuable tool with significant safeguards. He viewed it as allowing bottom-up development ideas to emerge organically rather than relying solely on central planning. He noted that any RIO proposal must go through the Planning Board and Town Meeting approval, providing checks and balances. He suggested that negative perceptions were based on the few large-scale projects recently proposed under the RIO bylaw.

Mr. Chazen endorsed Mr. Criswell's position, stating that the RIO provides a systematic approach and clear guidance to developers, which advances multifamily development. He emphasized the need for a long-term perspective beyond current pipeline projects, citing Cedar Street near Barton Road as a potential area that could benefit from RIO development.

Ms. Prosnitz also supported keeping the RIO, arguing it is difficult to eliminate a right once granted. She suggested tweaking the RIO rather than eliminating it, possibly by adjusting criteria like proximity to transportation or considering percentage-based approaches for single residence districts.

Mr. Shepherd agreed with the tweaking approach, endorsing development agreements before Town Meeting and increased consultation with abutters to ensure neighbors see value in proposed projects.

Mr. Welburn suggested the question couldn't be answered without a strategic housing plan for the town. He expressed dissatisfaction with the existing strategic housing process that wasn't conducted publicly and resulted in a "basket of ideas" rather than a cohesive plan. He noted there was more consensus around purpose than people might think, based on his analysis of previous meeting minutes. He also expressed opposition to state-dictated housing requirements and mentioned a ballot initiative to return zoning control to local municipalities.

Ms. Kloppenberg emphasized addressing the "fear of the unknown" through clarity in planning and development agreements before town meeting.

Mr. Charney discussed the town's historically slow, deliberative, consensus-based approach and provided context about upcoming planning efforts, including funds being requested at spring town meeting for a comprehensive master plan to begin July 2026. He mentioned plans for an area study of the Lower Falls district due to recent development activity there. He suggested that removing all land zoned as single residence from RIO eligibility would be a good focus for the Task Force, and reminded the group of the tight timeline on which they are operating in order to have a proposal before 2026 Annual Town Meeting.

Ms. Reilly shared a perspective about the value of removing barriers to development, citing Ezra Klein's book "Abundance." She emphasized the importance of educating residents about housing needs generally, separate

from specific projects. She noted how the strategic housing plan revealed shifts in age demographics related to tear-downs of starter homes.

Mr. Chazen posed the question – if the consensus were to be to eliminate the RIO Bylaw, the group would have to consider what they would replace it with, if anything.

Mr. Taylor observed that the RIO bylaw serves multiple purposes beyond conventional large-scale housing projects, including governing senior housing development and potential conversion of older buildings. He suggested it could be a tool for facilitating lower-density multi-unit housing solutions where appropriate.

Ms. Reinhardt Block joined the meeting at 8:08 PM. She noted that a density of 17 units/acre was allowed in Limited Residence, Business, Business A, Industrial, Industrial A, Wellesley Square Commercial District, and MBTA Community zoned properties, and wondered what locations would be appropriate for a RIO where higher density is not already allowed.

b) Splitting Uses: Conventional Multi-Family Housing v. Senior Housing Options

The statement presented was: "Wellesley should split the RIO into two different bylaws: one for conventional multi-family housing, and a different one for senior housing and assisted living."

Mr. Taylor described a proposed upcoming assisted living development at 888 Worcester Street. He noted that what the developer is seeking is not far from what is permitted under the RIO Bylaw.

Ms. Gottschalk strongly supported creating an overlay for senior housing, suggesting it could accommodate not only higher-density housing but also townhome-style 65+ communities. She maintained her position that conventional multifamily needs were already covered by existing zoning.

Mr. Chazen disagreed with separating the uses, arguing that the location attributes for both multifamily and senior housing overlap - both need proximity to services and open space. He suggested seniors shouldn't be segregated and would benefit from living in mixed neighborhoods with diverse age groups and housing types. He did note that assisted living and memory care housing is much different than independent senior living.

Mr. Charney noted that demographics in Wellesley's existing multifamily buildings skew older already. He explained that market forces make it unlikely that young families would move to Wellesley for apartment or townhouse living given the high costs. He suggested most multifamily development in town primarily serves older residents wanting to downsize in town or moving closer to children in Wellesley from another community.

Ms. Reinhardt Block noted the value of developments build specifically for the needs of seniors wishing to age in place, and suggested considering developing a building code or zoning bylaw specifically for seniors and to encourage the development of housing design for them to age in place. She cited examples of Senior Living Overlay Districts in Natick which may provide a good example for Wellesley. Mr. Charney notes that the type of development depends on the developer.

Mr. Criswell suggested that rather than separate bylaws, specific criteria for senior housing could be incorporated into the Planning Board's evaluation guidelines for RIO proposals.

Mr. Shepard brought up the need to develop housing for the "missing middle" demographic, and Mr. Charney explained that under the town's Inclusionary Zoning bylaw, 5% of housing units in future developments must be set aside for the "missing middle" demographic. He notes that "affordable" does not often mesh with what people often consider affordable.

Mr. Chazen noted that Area Median Income is not the median income for Wellesley, but for the Greater Boston area, and that the "missing middle" demographic may include families making up to \$200,000 a year. He also disagreed that families would not be willing to live in apartments or townhouses. He encouraged the community to use their imagination to consider a variety of different housing types and sizes.

Mr. Taylor explained his reasoning for suggesting the split, noting that senior housing uses are more widely accepted in town, typically require larger developments to be viable, and have different planning considerations than conventional housing.

c) Elimination of Single Residence Districts from RIO Bylaw

The statement presented was: "Wellesley should simply eliminate RIO eligibility in the single residence districts."

Ms. Reilly shared that her son was able to purchase a home in an expensive area of Seattle because his wife is a teacher and there was a local program that assisted educators in purchasing property. The property included two ADUs, which made it possible for additional families of different income levels to live in the community. She suggested that people may be more willing to accept larger homes in their neighborhoods if they were able to house more than one family.

Mr. Welburn strongly supported removing RIO eligibility from single residence districts, stating his constituents in Precinct C would be "very enthusiastic supporters." He noted that Article 42 at the last town meeting, which was similar in scope, received a 61% favorable vote.

Mr. Criswell opposed this change, noting the RIO could be used for smaller-scale projects in single residence districts with appropriate safeguards. He expressed concern that limiting multifamily development to areas within 1.5 blocks of Washington Street or Central Street would create a "giant parking lot from Newton Lower Falls to Natick."

Mr. Charney viewed this as a reasonable compromise, noting the 61% town meeting vote was significant. He explained that as a builder, he wouldn't consider applying for a RIO in a single residence district due to the current structure of the bylaw. Once a RIO is approved for a property, it allows up to 24 units per acre permanently, even if the initial developer only intends to build 4 units. He suggested possibly carving out certain split-zoned sites within single residence districts for a "watered down" version of the density.

Ms. Reinhardt Block noted that in Precinct D there are 11 acres of land up for sale from one seller, with other land for sale from other sellers in the area. Many of these parcels abut single residence districts and she expressed some concern over the potential for RIOs to negatively impact abutting single residence district neighborhoods. She noted that Precincts D and E has had more recent development than other precincts across town and has more parcels that would be eligible for a RIO district.

Ms. Prosnitz suggested a middle ground, allowing RIO eligibility in parcels with split zoning between commercial or industrial and single residence family districts rather than an all-or-nothing approach, which would allow for RIOs in locations other than along Washington and Central Streets. She noted the purpose is to incentivize residential development, not limit it or make it more challenging to construct. She cited the previously approved RIO on Cedar Street as a successful example of a split lot that received strong town meeting support.

Ms. Reinhardt Block stated that the Cedar/Worcester Street RIO approval occurred during a time when multiple other controversial zoning issues were occupying town attention. She noted some neighbors in that area remain unaware of or distressed by that project.

Mr. Charney agreed with the value of allowing RIOs with reduced density in split-zone parcels but wondered if there was enough time for the Task Force to consider such a proposal. He noted that the RIO bylaw is only one tool out of many to achieve housing production. A few other Task Members agreed with this idea.

Mr. Taylor proposed an alternative approach to the binary elimination, suggesting making the density limit a function of the underlying zoning district. He explained that in commercial districts, RIO creates a 1.4x density increase (from 17 to 24 units per acre), and applying that same multiplier to single residence districts would result in much more modest density increases - 6 units per acre in 10K districts instead of 4, or 3 units per acre in 20K districts instead of 2. He felt a density along those lines would have been more palatable to Town Meeting for the Washington Court RIO that was proposed at 2024 Special Town Meeting. He also suggested limiting RIO eligibility to parcels abutting or within 100 feet of commercial districts.

There was a brief discussion on density calculations in single residence districts, frontage, and how residents can anticipate developers to approach development projects across town.

As the meeting approached conclusion, members agreed more frequent meetings would be needed to develop recommendations in time for spring town meeting. Mr. Welburn suggested a joint meeting with the Planning Board and recommended establishing a subcommittee to synthesize the Task Force discussions into a draft proposal.

Staff will send out a Doodle poll to schedule additional meetings. Mr. Arbeene urged members to complete the Doodle as soon as possible.

Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 9:20 PM.