

RIO Task Force Meeting #7 - Meeting Minutes

November 18, 2025, at 7:00PM – Virtual Zoom Meeting

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

Call to Order/Confirmation of Participants

The meeting was called to order at 7:01 PM via Zoom by the Chair, Tom Taylor. He noted the meeting was live streaming on television, and would be available for later viewing on Wellesley Media. In attendance were staff members Brad Downey, Senior Planner, and Eric Arbeene, Planning Director. He noted Task Force members present included himself, Mr. Taylor, Vice Chair Peter Welburn, Mary Prosnitz, Joan Minklei, Don Shepard, Amy Gottschalk, Sheri Kassirer, Erin Reilly, Heather Sawitsky, Odessa Sanchez, Joe Hassell, Paul Criswell, Kara Reinhardt Block, Marc Charney, Ed Chazen.

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

Three residents addressed the Task Force:

Nick Rhind of 16 Garden Road in Precinct C spoke against the claim made at the previous meeting that all of Precinct C supports abolishing the RIO process. He indicated that there are many residents in Precinct C who support retaining RIO as a tool for addressing Wellesley's housing challenges. He noted that all RIOs need approval from the Planning Board and Town Meeting, preventing projects with serious community resistance from advancing. He opposed the proposal to exclude RIO from single-family districts, noting this would remove 97% of town from the process and eliminate exactly the non-commercial but commercial-adjacent properties for which RIOs are appropriate.

Katie Schuller, a Wellesley resident of 49 years, expressed concern that town committees have not listened to residents' voices. She stated that the proposed RIO bylaw allowing RIOs in single-family zoned areas exemplifies this issue. Ms. Schuler clarified she is not opposed to RIOs but noted that when the RIO was first established, it was restricted from single-family zones, and many residents were opposed when that restriction was changed. She urged the Task Force to restrict RIOs from single-family zoned areas.

Ms. Nancy Jones attempted to speak but experienced technical difficulties with her audio connection. Mr. Taylor indicated she would be given priority to speak at the next meeting if she wished.

Approval of Meeting Minutes – 10/16/25

Several Task Force members suggested edits to the minutes:

Ms. Gottschalk asked to clarify her statement regarding the RIO allowing 24 units per acre while the state, per the MBTA law, only allows 15 units per acre, noting that Wellesley currently allows 17 units per acre.

Ms. Reinhardt Block requested the minutes to include the zoning districts in which 17 units/acre are allowed by right, which she had listed at the meeting, and made a point regarding notifications. She also asked that her last name be listed as "Reinhardt Block" in the minutes.

Ms. Prosnitz noted her name was misspelled in the first list of attendees.

Mr. Criswell motioned to approve the minutes of October 16, 2025, noting the requested amendments. Ms. Reilly seconded the motion. The vote passed, 14 in favor with 2 abstentions.

RIO Discussion Questions

a) Elimination of Single Residence Districts from RIO Bylaw – discussion continued from 10/16/25 meeting

Mr. Taylor presented the statement: "Wellesley should simply eliminate RIO eligibility in the single residence districts" for discussion, and provided additional context behind considering density tables that allow for varied densities depending on parcel location.

Ms. Minklei stated that there might be an appetite in town to eliminate RIO in single-residence districts based on correspondence received and previous speaker comments. She questioned whether RIO was still necessary given the volume of possible housing units in the pipeline that didn't require a RIO for approval.

Mr. Hassell expressed that completely eliminating RIO from single-family districts would eliminate a tool that could allow for appropriate growth in the immediate future. Drawing from his experience with a failed RIO project, he suggested a middle ground approach such as allowing RIOs in single-family residences that abut commercial areas.

Ms. Sawitsky acknowledged significant concerns about RIOs from town residents but was open to not eliminating them entirely from single residence districts. She recommended articulating specific characteristics necessary to build in a single-residence district.

Mr. Chazen suggested allowing some multi-family development along important commercial roads while maintaining primarily single-residence districts. He cited the Fraser Medical buildings on Washington Street as an example of an underutilized transit-oriented property and suggested defining RIO eligibility based on setback distance from major roads.

Mr. Charney supported removing RIO from single-family districts, noting that property owners can always request rezoning for specific parcels that warrant different development. He referenced a GIS analysis showing relatively few "anomaly sites" that straddle commercial and residential zones. He noted that the logistical and political challenges of getting RIO approval in a single-residence district is enough of a challenge to deter developers from pursuing that option.

Ms. Reinhardt Block presented precinct-by-precinct data showing disparities in commercial zoning, with some precincts having far more commercial areas than others. She noted, as an example, Precinct D has 46 acres and Precinct E has 85 acres of commercial land, while Precincts C, G, and F have zero. She expressed concern about the already disproportionate impact of development on certain areas of town and argued that removing RIO from single residence districts would provide protection from overdevelopment.

Mr. Criswell opposed eliminating RIO from single-family residence districts, arguing that the RIO process provides opportunities for appropriate development on a case-by-case basis. He supported a lower density in single-residence districts, but noted that the current process has generally worked to prevent inappropriate development while allowing creative solutions. He provided an example of how current regulations create inconsistencies, such as allowing ADUs but not conversion of an existing home to a multi-family structure.

Ms. Gottschalk asked about properties in single-family districts with variances that allow for multiple units. Mr. Taylor and Mr. Arbeene explained that variances are granted by the Zoning Board of Appeals, and in many cases were granted several decades ago, but they are not granted often. They also explained that multi-family homes that pre-dated zoning laws are grandfathered into the Zoning Bylaw, but these homes are historic.

Mr. Charney noted that with the new ADU laws, any single-family parcel could essentially, by-right, become a multi-family parcel, with up to 2 units. Mr. Arbeene clarified that a multi-family parcel can only build one ADU by-right, regardless of how many units are on the parcel.

Ms. Kloppenberg emphasized Ms. Reinhardt Block's comment that certain areas of town were feeling the brunt of development more than others. She encouraged the group to consider how those inequities may be addressed in a final recommendation.

Ms. Sanchez supported eliminating RIO from single residence districts, arguing this would strengthen conversations around housing projects and reduce resistance based on fear of increased density in single-family neighborhoods.

Mr. Shepard opposed eliminating RIO from single-residence districts, noting there may be appropriate properties for such a development. He suggested considering mechanisms that would benefit abutters through developer funded amenities, such as street improvements, increasing safety around intersections, improving parks, and walkability enhancements, which may make residents more amenable to multi-family housing.

Ms. Reinhardt Block cautioned Task Force members from making statements that diminish legitimate stress caused by neighbors who live close to potential development sites. She noted the stresses endured by such individuals due to the uncertainty of potential multi-family developments in their neighborhoods.

Mr. Welburn noted that 61% of Town Meeting members at the last Annual Town Meeting voted in favor of restricting RIOs to commercial areas. He also mentioned receiving numerous calls and emails from residents wanting RIO eliminated from single-family districts, which was an idea he supported. Mr. Arbeene noted that emails received by the Task Force may be put on the website, but personal information will first need to be redacted.

Ms. Reilly acknowledged residents' concerns about development but emphasized the need to consider those who cannot afford to live in Wellesley, asking the Task Force to keep those people in mind during deliberations. She agreed with others who noted that there appears to be a schism between details and ideology.

The discussion then shifted to density concerns in various zoning districts. Mr. Taylor asked for thoughts on RIO in districts that fall between commercial zones (which allow 17 units per acre) and single residence districts. Mr. Taylor presented the Wellesley Property Viewer map.

Ms. Gottschalk expressed concern about allowing up to 24 units/acre development in general residence districts.

Ms. Kassirer noted she would like to be responsive to the state's housing needs. She recognized that a lot of individuals still need housing and would like the community to rise to the challenge of meeting that need. She encouraged members to be more imaginative on how the community supports housing needs and consider what it means to be a welcoming community.

Ms. Minklei wondered whether increasing housing supply will improve affordability. Mr. Taylor explained what affordability means in relation to inclusionary zoning and how affordability is addressed in the zoning bylaw.

Mr. Chazen noted that Area Median Income is a regional number, not one applicable to Wellesley only. He suggested that zones allowing increased density should be located in areas closer to Route 9 or Route 128, where the impact to traffic will be minimal.

Mr. Taylor confirmed that inclusionary zoning applies to projects with 5 or more units. Ms. Reinhardt Block confirmed that any project in a Single Residence district with less than 5 units may then only produce market rate units and no affordable units, which may lessen the total percentage of affordable units in town.

Ms. Prosnitz suggested a compromise position of reducing the maximum RIO density from 24 units per acre to 17 units (matching the MBTA Communities requirement) to make projects more palatable to Town Meeting.

Mr. Welburn questioned whether there is a housing crisis, noting he has lived through several housing bubbles in his 50+ years in town, and expressed doubt that doubling Wellesley's housing supply would make a meaningful difference to the state's overall housing situation.

b) Finalizing Project Scope Prior to Town Meeting

Mr. Taylor presented the statement: "Wellesley should define a way, if any, to lock in the scope of a proposed RIO development before a zoning map change is voted on by Town Meeting, not after."

He suggested several potential ideas, noting that they may not be ideas that could be incorporated into the zoning bylaw, but could be codified in practice. These included expecting a development agreement prior to the zoning map decision by Town Meeting, expecting traffic studies to be completed before the zoning change decision, and encouraging the Planning Board not to sponsor zoning articles at Town Meeting, even if they support them.

Mr. Criswell identified points brought up by Mr. Taylor as main weaknesses in the current RIO process. He strongly supported requiring a binding development agreement when asking Town Meeting to vote, noting many Town Meeting members would not support a project without certainty about what would be built. He was less supportive of requiring traffic studies, viewing them as potentially subjective and an added expense for developers. He suggested the Planning Board provide comments and findings for each proposed RIO project, including comments on how well developers engaged with the community early in the planning process.

Mr. Taylor notes development agreements cannot be entered into by the Planning Board, but by the Select Board.

Ms. Gottschalk agreed with requiring development agreements and stated that developers should bear more responsibility for the process than the Planning Board.

Ms. Minklei supported all three ideas, especially having development agreements to ensure Town Meeting knows what they're approving and to prevent situations where a property could be sold after RIO approval and developed differently than presented.

Ms. Sawitsky endorsed the recommendation for development agreements, noting Town Meeting members want assurance that the final building will closely resemble what was presented to them. She also noted the value of input from the Planning Board on each proposed project.

Ms. Reinhardt Block expressed concerns about the enforceability of development agreements, citing examples of problems with past projects. She stated that Jumbo Capital, which has proposed an assisted living facility at 888 Worcester Street, had suggested an interest in a development agreement as a zoning requirement.

Mr. Welburn supported requiring development agreements rather than merely expecting them, and suggested hearing from the developers on the Task Force regarding the potential burden of a development agreement. Mr. Taylor noted that the Planning Board may not have the authority to require the Select Board to enter into a development agreement.

Mr. Hassall, from a developer's perspective, supported development agreements, noting they are standard in Boston and other communities. He stated they are enforceable contracts that provide certainty for all parties.

Mr. Charney agreed, emphasizing that certainty is key to successful development, and that the benefits of a development agreement outweigh any additional costs to the developer.

Mr. Sheppard suggested the Planning Board could facilitate informed decision-making by establishing standards for traffic studies and working with the Select Board on visualizations to help the town understand proposed developments.

Task Force Chair Updates

a. Discuss Dates and Preview Agendas for Next Meetings

Mr. Taylor discussed the timeline for completing the Task Force's work. The next Task Force meetings are scheduled for December 2 and December 16, 2025, with the warrant for Town Meeting closing on December 23, 2025. The Planning Board will meet on December 1, 15, and 22, 2025, with the December 22 meeting specifically scheduled to address Task Force recommendations.

He noted that a draft recommendation will need to be discussed and voted on by the Task Force. If approved, it will then have to be translated into a report and then go before the Planning Board for discussion and approval.

Mr. Chazen agreed that requiring a traffic study beforehand did not make a lot of sense, though a development agreement is a recommendation he would support.

Mr. Taylor summarized the group's consensus, highlighting that there are points that seemed amenable to the group that could easily be incorporated into a recommendation with a lot of support.

Ms. Reinhardt Block asked if there were plans for public engagement to make town residents aware of the work of the RIO Task Force.

Mr. Taylor offered three options laying out possible pathways for the Task Force. These included doing nothing for Annual Town Meeting 2026, putting forward key recommendations (such as changes to the Purpose statement section of the bylaw) for Annual Town Meeting 2026 and stopping there, and putting forward key recommendations for Annual Town Meeting 2026 and then develop Phase 2 recommendations (such as tackling setbacks, town amenities, and senior housing) for discussion at a later Town Meeting.

Mr. Taylor motioned to postpone delivery of a recommendation to the Planning Board until after the 2026 Annual Town Meeting. Mr. Charney seconded the motion. Mr. Taylor clarified that a 'no' vote is a vote for delivering recommendations to the Planning Board in time for inclusion on the warrant for 2026 Annual Town Meeting. The vote failed, 14 voting against the motion, 0 voting in favor. Consensus of the Task Force was unanimous for delivering recommendations to the Planning Board in time for inclusion on the warrant for 2026 Annual Town Meeting.

Mr. Taylor proposed focusing on key recommendations for the next meeting, including redefining the purpose statement for the RIO, addressing restrictions on RIOs in single-family districts, and addressing process improvements, including development agreements.

He indicated that technical adjustments and other recommendations might be developed for a "Phase 2" that could be discussed and formalized for later implementation.

Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 9:46 PM.