

# METROPOLITAN

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## MAST hires a financial expert

By KEVIN HOFFMANN  
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Kansas City's ambulance service — facing financial distress — has turned to a former city budget official to guide it through economic hurdles.

John Sharp, executive director of Metropolitan Ambulance Services Trust, announced Tuesday the hiring of Larry Plaisted as chief financial officer.

Plaisted, 58, was Kansas City's budget director for seven years and worked in the budget office for 34 years. He accepted an early retirement package in March.

Plaisted will be paid \$82,000 a year at MAST.

Plaisted said that since March, he had enjoyed gardening, traveling and spending time with his wife and granddaughter. He said he was looking forward to his new role.

"The metropolitan area needs an ambulance service, and I think MAST has done a good job," he said. "There are challenges, but I think it will be exciting to be part of finding the solutions to those challenges."

Plaisted will start his new duties today. Sharp said Plaisted's background should allow him to contribute immediately.

"As the city's budget officer, Larry made several positive suggestions to us on how to improve our financial analysis that have already been helpful," Sharp said. "I'm confident that as chief financial officer, he will be able to implement many further improvements."

Tom Schweitzer, the previous financial officer, resigned July 29, Sharp said. Sharp declined to elaborate on a reason behind the resignation.

"We wish Tom well, and I think everybody here is appreciative of all the work he did, especially in such challenging financial times," Sharp said.

Schweitzer, reached last week at home, also declined to discuss his departure.

The agency will need prompt results from Plaisted. For more than a year, MAST has struggled financially.

Officials blame federal cuts in Medicare reimbursements that began this spring, but the economic problems arose months before the cuts began.

Last summer, private contractor Emergency Providers Inc. sued MAST after the agency continually failed to make full payments for service.

MAST took over sole operation of the ambulance service July 1 after officials said they could not afford a contract with Emergency Providers.

Two days later, city Auditor Mark Funkhouser released a report that found MAST not financially viable without further funding, most likely from the city. The report detailed several problems with MAST, including the fact that its board of trustees and administrators were aware of worsening finances but "made decisions based on misperceptions."

Agency officials were unlikely to fix the problems, the report stated, and needed to do a better job analyzing

the cost of its services and forecasting budgets.

Members of the City Council's budget committee have indicated that \$1.9 million of additional funding promised to MAST is uncertain unless agency officials develop a long-term plan for financial stability.

"We can't continue to pour millions into something that is not functioning," committee chairman Jim Rowland said.

The \$1.9 million is critical for MAST. An independent financial auditor told the MAST board last month he would be concerned about the solvency of MAST without the \$1.9 million.

Rowland said his committee understood the ambulance service provided a critical city service but wanted to determine whether changes needed to be made in the way MAST operated.

Hiring a new financial officer might help, Rowland said, but MAST leadership needs to analyze the financial data and show a solid plan for the future.

Committee member Troy Nash, who recently rode in an ambulance to get an idea of the work crews were doing, said he was impressed. But he, too, said MAST faced a financial crossroads. Plaisted should help, Nash said.

"I think he is an excellent choice," he said. "Clearly having Larry at the helm of the finances will help instill confidence."

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