



# Back in Minnesota, Smith starts Senate sprint



**Brian Bakst** January 5, 2018, 9:35 AM



Sen. Tina Smith leans in to hear welder Steven Larson talk about his job at Wyoming Machine in Stacy, Minn. Smith was there Friday to hear about workforce development concerns. *Brian Bakst | MPR News*

Stacy, Minn. — New U.S. Sen. Tina Smith got a quick taste Friday of the juggle between Washington and Minnesota, using her first day back in the state to hold a workforce training roundtable before heading north for more receptions and fact-finding events.

The information cramming underscores a reality for Smith: She has little time to get up to speed for the job she just began Wednesday and one she'll be asking voters to extend for two more years in a November special election.

Her appearance at the sister-owned Wyoming Machine sheet metal fabricating factory in Stacy lasted about an hour. After a tour of the factory floor, she sat for a panel discussion with company owners, Lori and Traci Tapani, as well as local education and development agency leaders.

“This is my first official event back in Minnesota as United States senator,” Smith told the group, assembled at four folding tables. “It was important for me to come here because I knew when I was lieutenant governor that one of Minnesota’s biggest competitive advantages was the high-quality workforce we have.”

Over the hum of a welder working nearby, she added, “And also one of the biggest challenges as we look toward the future is making sure those workers have the job skills that they need to come and work at the great companies like you guys have built. And we expect we are going to be 100,000 people short for the great jobs that are being created in the state.”

She heard concerns about diminished federal funding for a training program administered in part by the Central Minnesota Jobs and Training partnership. Barb Chaffee, chief executive of that public-private partnership, laid it out.

“We are in a crisis,” she said. “We don’t have enough people in the pipeline, and that is the issue.”

She urged Smith to fight funding cutbacks as she gets down to work in Washington.

From Stacy, Smith was headed to Duluth and later to the Iron Range to discuss pensions, steel industry worries and broadband internet. She’ll also appear at receptions.

Smith has little time to waste. She’s a candidate for the special election just 10 months away.

With a compressed campaign calendar, Smith says she expects to keep up a fast pace that will combine both campaign and official duties.

“My number one priority is to be the best senator I can be. That is my job. That’s why Governor Dayton appointed me,” she said. “It certainly is a challenge, but it’s a challenge that I’m up for.”

Republicans will also have to scramble. So far only one, state Sen. Karin Housley, has announced. But others are looking at it.

Republican Norm Coleman said he has no interest in running for U.S. Senate again or getting into this year’s race for Minnesota governor.

“I always say never say never but running in 2018 is never,” Coleman said in an interview at his Washington, D.C., lobbying firm.

Coleman, who also runs the conservative American Action Network, says he thinks former Gov. Tim Pawlenty could defeat Smith in November. He wants Pawlenty to run.

“I sat down with him. I encouraged him,” Coleman said. “I think he would be a tremendous representative of Minnesota in the United States Senate.”



Former Republican Sen. Norm Coleman in the lobby of his Washington, D.C., lobbying firm. Mark Zdechlik | MPR News

Pawlenty has not responded to MPR News inquiries about his political future, although he recently said he’s been reflecting on political matters of the day.

Late last year, former U.S. Rep. Michele Bachmann said on a national talk show hosted by televangelist Jim Bakker that she is weighing a run. She hasn’t given a timetable for announcing a decision.

*MPR News Reporter Mark Zdechlik contributed to this report.*

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