

[MUSIC PLAYING]

NINA MOINI: I'm Nina Moini. This is *Minnesota Now*, and we are broadcasting live from day one of the state fair. Pause for cheers. Here we go.

[CHEERING]

We better get some. Wonderful crowd with us here today. Over the next 12 days, Minnesotans will come here to encounter animals, art, and decadent food, and politicians will have a chance to meet voters face to face. Very important. It could be especially important in a competitive midterm election year like this one, 2026.

Democratic US Senator Tina Smith kicked off one of this year's most significant statewide races when she announced she would not be seeking reelection. She now has a few months left in her term, and she joins us here live at the MPR stage. Thanks for being with us, Senator.

TINA SMITH: Well thank you. What a treat to be here. And it's the perfect Minnesota State Fair first day.

NINA MOINI: We really lucked out. And were probably here bright and early or dark and early. You've already put in a full day here. How has it been being here, knowing you don't-- you don't really have to run for anything.

TINA SMITH: It's so much fun. We got here at around 6:30 in the morning and visited with all the people that were waiting in line to be the first ones to walk through the gates at 7:00. And I was-- it was a little bit of nostalgia honestly. I'm sure I will be here on the first day next year though I doubt I will be there at 6:30 in the morning. I might be a little bit later.

And it's really fun for me because today I am here with my family and two of our grandchildren who are also here. So it's really a special thing to be here with Harlan and June and Sam and Emily and Archie and the whole-- part of my family.

NINA MOINI: I do want to just take a moment. It's a joyful event obviously, but we're here on a somber day. We know it's been one year today since the mass shooting at Annunciation Church and School in Minneapolis that took the lives of two children and injured 29 people. We dedicated our program yesterday to Annunciation and the follow up of what's happened there. But we wanted to take a moment just to talk about what's on your mind today, recognizing what happened a year ago.

TINA SMITH: Well, Annunciation School is just a couple of miles from where Archie and I live, and so I think of those-- that big community every single day when I drive past this school or drive around the bandshell. And what I've been thinking about yesterday and today is just what a light that community has been. They had such a horrible burden to carry that was thrust upon them, this horrible act of violence that shattered their lives. And they have risen in this moment to be such a center of compassion and empathy.

And each one of them in their different ways is processing, of course, the pain and the grief and the trauma, but they have been a real inspiration for me. I went over to the school yesterday just to drop off a personal note to everybody in the community, to the teachers and parents and, of course, the students. And it's a-- it is a big passage this day and a sad one and also I think an inspiration as we think about how that community has really in the face of darkness and badness has shown a way.

NINA MOINI: Shown light and the importance of community. And we know that the Minnesota State Fair also emphasizes the importance of community. That's why it's important for lawmakers like yourself to be out here. We know DFL lieutenant governor Peggy Flanagan and Republican sports broadcaster Michele Tafoya won their party's primaries. They're now competing for your seat. How confident are you feeling about Democrat's chances of, one, keeping your seat but perhaps taking control of one or both chambers of Congress?

TINA SMITH: Well, so there's a question of confidence, and I feel confident. But I also believe in hard work, and I believe in organizing. And I think a couple of things that I note that give me a sense that Peggy Flanagan will be the next senator from Minnesota. And one is that if you look at the turnout of Minnesotans in the Democratic primary, it was dramatically higher than the turnout in Republican in the Republican primaries. So what that tells me is that people who want to see Democrats elected to the Senate and to the governor's office are motivated and they are inspired and they are ready to turn out and show up.

But this is going to be a big organizing project. One of the things I think is so interesting about the Democratic primary is there was massive amounts of money poured into the primary and yet-- against Peggy-- and yet Peggy won decisively by nearly 20 points, which I think tells me as Peggy says that it is going to be the many over the money in this election. And we're seeing that in Senate races around the country. So it gives me some hope for our democracy.

NINA MOINI: And I'll just say everyone's been invited. Candidates from various races have been invited to join us here on the stage. We'll be back next Thursday, so there's still time for people to come by and make their cases.

TINA SMITH: Tell them it's a good audience. It's a good place to be.

NINA MOINI: It's a great audience. That's right.

TINA SMITH: A great place to be.

NINA MOINI: I do want to take a moment to talk about our farmers. Obviously, agriculture, the backbone of the Minnesota State Fair and the beautiful experiences that people have here. The proposed farm bill in Congress includes \$12 billion in support for farmers. You and Senator Amy Klobuchar are on the Senate Ag Committee, where that bill has stalled over cuts to SNAP. What are your concerns regarding food assistance in Minnesota? What's it going to take to make a compromise there?

TINA SMITH: So I think that we offered a very reasonable compromise. The question here is whether we can't agree to just simply delay these draconian SNAP cuts and the cost shift to county taxpayers. There's many things that I would change and not do about the way that the Donald Trump and Republicans cut nutrition benefits, which is going to have a big impact around the state and around the country. What we wanted to do in the farm bill was just simply delay one piece of it. And we don't have support for that yet, but we're going to keep on working on it.

The broader question is what is happening in the ag sector in Minnesota and around the country, and this is one of the reasons it's great to come to the fair to talk to so many farmers and producers. It is rough going right now as you know so well. And every day, it seems like there is some new piece of bad news. This past week, we heard about additional tariffs on-- Canadian tariffs, which the Canadians will retaliate against. That could have huge impacts on all communities in Minnesota. And then the president has basically made the decision to allow foreign ground beef into the country, which just feels like a slap in the face to ranchers around the country who are already really struggling, and yet here now, they're being forced to compete against low cost foreign beef that we don't even really where it came from.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, farmers are facing high costs, low prices for crops. What would you say to farmers who say why delay getting aid to them this \$12 billion. Why delay that for I think it's another year's time that you're wanting counties and states to have to make those SNAP adjustments? Why delay that?

TINA SMITH: So it's interesting because I've certainly talked to many, many farmers about this, and they understand why it is that this is such an important issue because nutrition benefits is a big issue in rural counties. And they also know that there are-- many of the farm programs were funded in the bills that passed a year or so ago. But there are some really important and mostly bipartisan provisions that are in this bill that we really need to keep on working to get done.

NINA MOINI: I want to talk about hemp farmers and brewers in the state that stand to lose a lot of business if a nationwide hemp THC ban that's set to take effect later this year. We had a Bent Paddle Brewery on the show I think just last week from the Duluth area. The Senate approved a delay until mid-December. People in the industry are hoping that'll be enough time to come up with regulations rather than an outright ban. Do you think there's a workable solution?

TINA SMITH: I do think that there's a path forward here, and I want to just do a shout out to my colleague Amy Klobuchar, who's been working very hard on this as a ranking member of the ag committee and working with Rand Paul and Republicans on both-- Republicans and Democrats to try to find a path forward in a way to-- and a way to fix this because this is completely unnecessary.

In Minnesota, we have good, strong, robust protections, consumer protections, making sure that kids can't get their-- are not able to buy THC products. And this is a really important new business line for Brewers who are seeing their markets shrink in other places. So I hope we can get this done. Be a good thing to get done before Amy and I leave.

NINA MOINI: Just lastly I want to bring it back to the fair. We talked about-- for folks who don't or don't recall, especially in a midterm year, there's booths for any number of candidates all around. And in this day of age of social media and all the different ways that people can reach an audience, why do you think the fair is still such an important place for lawmakers to come?

TINA SMITH: Well, as somebody who came up in organizing, I don't think there's any substitute for face-to-face conversations with people. And I've seen this happening at the Minnesota State Fair for decades. I've been remembering, I don't how many of the people in the audience remember being at the state fair in 1998, a while ago, and I remember the Jessie Ventura booth right around the corner, and there was Jessie sitting at his booth, and there was a line that snaked around the block of people who were waiting to say hello to him. And I'm like, what the heck is going on here.

And, of course, he won that election. So you can get a sense for where people are and what people are feeling. And the other thing I'll say is I firmly believe that most people don't wake up in the morning and say I'm a Democrat. What am I going to have for dinner? Or I'm a Republican. How am I going to get my kids to school? They just are trying to make their lives work.

And so being here all together is such-- I have-- so many people are here because they love that sense of community every day. But I think it's especially real on the first day when people are just so joyful, especially on a beautiful day like today. So good politics.

I was walking by a guy the other day or a couple of hours ago who saw me, and all he said was politics. You're like I'm more than that.

NINA MOINI: Last question, a really tough one. What's your favorite thing to eat at the fair?

TINA SMITH: I am a carnivore, and so I'm proud to say that I ate the very first pork schnitzel for breakfast this morning at the Farmers Union booth. It's delicious. I recommend it. Also a big fan of big fat bacon, which I think I'm going to have for my third lunch, and pork chop on a stick, which is right across the road there.

NINA MOINI: All right, Senator Tina Smith, thank you for your time. We appreciate it.

TINA SMITH: Thank you so much. Thanks, everyone.

NINA MOINI: That's US Senator from Minnesota, Tina Smith.