

Slouching toward St. Paul: the gubernatorial field so far

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Sixteen months out, it's already evident that the 2010 Minnesota governor's race is unlike any other we've seen. There have been early and lengthy endorsement battles before; think **Brian Sullivan** and **Tim Pawlenty** in the run-up to 2002. But never have so many run so hard at such an early juncture. Collectively, the DFL and GOP fields are like a school of piranha turned loose in the St. Croix River, where they have begun to suck up personal and financial commitments--the food and oxygen of politics--at a stunning rate. The race is developing so quickly this year that Minneapolis Mayor **R.T. Rybak**, who was expected to wait until after this fall's city elections to jump in publicly, was moved to tell a crowd last week that he's "very likely" to run.

So a little handicapping would seem to be in order. Just remember that, feeding frenzy aside, 16 months is a long time. The hot-or-not lists that follow shouldn't be confused with predictions. They're a snapshot of where matters stand now. Fast-moving as the campaign may be, much could change on the basis of late entries to the field; that's why we've also included notes on who's lurking backstage.

WHO'S HOT

DFL: Paul Thissen

There are already two DFL races in view: a contest for the party's late-spring endorsement, and an ensuing primary battle that is sure to pit the endorsee against **Mark Dayton** and **Matt Entenza**, two amply bankrolled candidates who have made it clear they won't abide by the endorsement.

We're not saying Thissen is a frontrunner for the endorsement. He remains a dark horse. But in the early going, he has been the DFL candidate who has shone brightest--traveling all over the state, highlighting health care, and earning high marks from competitors for presentation and for strategic judgment. A few months back, he looked to most observers like a campaign footnote. No more.

GOP: Marty Seifert

Seifert was first out of the gate, resigning his position as House minority leader on the day after **Tim Pawlenty** announced he wouldn't run for a third term. He has campaigned and networked very hard in the ensuing two months. And he has a presumptive fundraising advantage among Republicans by dint of two factors--his House leadership role and, more important, the recruitment of **Bill Cooper**, former head of TCF and of the state Republican party, to serve as finance chair of his campaign.

But Seifert is also making enemies within GOP ranks along the way, and it remains to be seen whether that will hurt him in the GOP endorsement fight. Many people privately blame Seifert for allegedly spreading ad hominem attacks about the competition through back channels. "I wouldn't say people are

mad at Marty," one Republican tells PIM. "I would just say he's extremely disliked."

Be that as it may, there's no question he has the strongest GOP campaign at present.

WHO'S NOT

DFL: Margaret Anderson Kelliher

A few months ago, there were many at the Capitol who thought Kelliher could claim the DFL endorsement without breaking a sweat. We've been a little shocked at the vehemence with which her role in the end-of-session dynamics at the Legislature this year has been condemned by people in and around the gubernatorial race. To hear some of them tell it, her failed tactical judgment--and her lack of composure when the unallotment bomb was first dropped--have damaged her not-yet-announced candidacy past repair.

As the lone candidate from DFL legislative leadership, she's bound to take that heat. But we would argue that if Kelliher's stock was artificially inflated before the end of the legislative session, it's artificially depressed now. She's still a leading endorsement contender for several reasons. Kelliher is one of the most visible, connected, and publicly liked people in the Legislature. As a farm girl who now represents one of the toniest districts in the Twin Cities, she sports a personal biography that straddles the town-and-country divide, and her style reflects that. As a woman who is very popular with female pols and organizations, she has built enormous goodwill and fundraising potential in advance of a race in which many Democrats want to see a woman running. (**Susan Gaertner**, the other DFL woman in the field, appears to have far less traction on this front.)

GOP: Who can tell?

We can't. There is really no one here who is underperforming expectations at the outset, in part because few of them come with any expectations attached. One veteran lobbyist we spoke to the other day called the Republican field "terrifying," and he didn't mean from a DFL point of view. On the other hand, we think there could be a great leveler here: Next year could well be a terrible one for Democrats all across the country.

WHO'S LURKING?

DFL: Besides Kelliher, who is expected to form her committee sometime this month, there's R.T. Rybak, who is all but certain to get in this fall. Nearly every DFLer we've talked with thinks Rybak will be a major contender for the endorsement. Some are already predicting he'll win it. Rybak's early and avid ties to the **Obama** campaign have certainly opened a lot of doors for him among influential Minnesota pols and donors.

We're hearing that St. Paul Mayor **Chris Coleman** is still likely to run as well.

GOP: Norm Coleman said recently that he won't announce whether he's running until late winter, but our sources are practically unanimous in thinking Coleman will opt for private-sector employment that allows him to cash in on his Washington ties.

Former GOP House Speaker **Steve Sviggum** was widely viewed as a formidable candidate until he was forced to suspend his efforts owing to the federal Hatch Act, which prohibits federal employees from

running for partisan office. Sviggum likely qualifies as one because he administers OSHA funds through his job at the Department of Labor and Industry. This morning he told *PIM* that he still hasn't received the USDOJ's formal opinion on the matter, but added that officials there "said verbally I was covered by the Hatch Act because of my jurisdiction over and management of the OSHA program." Barring some shake-up in the field that enables a credible late entry, it's unlikely he'll get back in.

Rep. **Laura Brod** suspended her campaign as well--for health reasons--and it's unclear whether she'll be back. But at least one Democrat in the race told us without hesitation that, after Coleman, she was potentially the most formidable general-election candidate in the Republican field. We have no idea what's up with her, and neither do our sources, but Brod could yet prove an important factor.

No details here, but we've started to hear rumblings that **Mike Vekich**, who recently chaired the governor's 21st Century Tax Reform commission, may be looking at a winter entry into the GOP race. Vekich, a vice-chair (and past chair) of the MnSCU Board of Trustees, ran for governor once before, in 2002.