After Gov. Rick Scott replaced Rod Jones on the Board of Chiropractic Medicine this week, his father Sen. Dennis Jones, R-Seminole, who has clashed with Gov. Rick Scott over prison privatization, made it patently clear that he would be willing to campaign for another Republican in 2014.

Jones said he expects a primary challenger to arise because of Scott’s low approval ratings.

“If his numbers don’t go any higher, I can’t image he’d run anyway,” Jones speculated.

But Scott has said he loves his job and intends to run. Only a single Democrat has announced plans to challenge the governor. And political experts say that despite the public opinion polling results, his critics shouldn’t be overly optimistic about pushing him back into the business world in two years.

University of Florida political science professor Daniel Smith said Scott, by announcing Tuesday that he isn’t concerned about re-election expenses, sent a strong message to challengers in both parties.

The governor has also been building support from within the party by improving on his 2011 legislative session performance, slashing fewer individual pet projects in the 2012 budget. Those moves have quieted Capitol rumblings that Florida Chief Financial Officer Jeff Atwater or Agriculture Commissioner Adam Putnam might look at advancing a forecast 2018 clash by four years.

Another big change from 2012 for any Democratic challenge in 2014 is that Scott will be running on his record, viewed as a Tallahassee insider across the Panhandle and peninsula, rather than as the tea party-backed outsider with a questionable business record from his final days at HCA Inc.
“Alex Sink ran as a fiscal conservative with business acumen and that didn’t work against Rick Scott when he had a lot of negatives with respect to his business performance,” Smith said.

“If they (voters) overlooked it once, they’re not going to be looking at it again. That message is not going to be working for Democrats this time around. And in some ways that would undermine Alex Sink’s message.”

Kevin Wagner, Florida Atlantic University assistant professor of political science, bluntly said the Democrats, with U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Orlando, as their only statewide elected official, don’t have a strong pool of potential candidates at this point.

“It’s not enough that Scott is unpopular,” Wagner responded in an email. “If Democrats are to compete, they will need a viable alternative.”

The 70-year-old Senate Democratic Leader Nan Rich, D-Weston, has already opened a campaign account, but experts say more eyes are on the possible retreads: Alex Sink, who ran unsuccessfully in 2010 against Scott, and Florida Democratic Party Chairman Rod Smith, who was Sink’s running mate and made his own bid for the governor’s mansion in 2006 but failed to survive the primary.

There is also the specter of former Gov. Charlie Crist. The longtime Republican officeholder went independent after he was overtaken by Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Miami, in the 2010 GOP Senate contest.

“He’s the big wild card,” Smith said. “He certainly has the name recognition, certainly has the wherewithal to raise money quickly. Whether Democrats are going to be willing to vote for him in a Democratic primary is another question. He was able to peel off Democrats in his Senate bid, but that is different than competing as a Democrat in a closed primary.”

Raising money will be key.

Democrats aren’t expected to be able to match Republicans dollar for dollar, but they must remain competitive.

“Democrats are never going to compete on equal footing with Republicans when it comes to statewide elected office,” Smith admitted. “Over the last five election cycles, the RPOF has been a juggernaut when it comes to fundraising in nonpresidential cycles. When Governor Scott self-financed (in 2010), those dollars were able to go to other statewide races. So Democrats know they are going to be out-funded in a statewide race like the governorship.”

Speaking to reporters on Tuesday, Scott said he isn’t going to draw from his own finances again, though he confidently added, “I don’t know what it will cost, but we’ll have the money to win.”
The 527 political action committee set up for Scott, named Let’s Get to Work, attracted more than $910,000 in the first quarter of the year.

Smith said it will be interesting to see the fiscal numbers Rich is able to post when her first records are due in July.

Rich, who is term-limited from seeking re-election to the Florida Senate this fall, said the first hurdle will be making her name better known outside South Florida and Tallahassee.

Rich also echoed Smith, that the GOP will have a fundraising advantage, regardless of the Democratic challenger.

“You don’t need to have as much money as he has, you just need to have enough money,” Rich said. “I don’t think it’s only about money. You also need to have the message and ability to connect with the voters, and I think that is a strength of mine.”

One thing on which experts agreed is that Rich, a South Florida liberal who has a 12-year record in the state Legislature, would offer a clear alternative for Floridians from the conservative Scott.