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Weathers more prepared for ag job

HUGH WEATHERS and William Bell both want to develop niche markets, encourage the type of diversification they have implemented on their farms and promote bio-fuel. Both have solid backgrounds in agriculture. Both are clearly more qualified for the job of agriculture commissioner than the man voters elected four years ago.

But where there are significant differences, Mr. Weathers comes out ahead.

Mr. Weathers, who was appointed by Gov. Mark Sanford when former commissioner Charlie Sharpe was indicted on federal corruption charges, starts with the advantage of any competent incumbent: He has effectively run the agency — returning a sense of professionalism that was shaken by Mr. Sharpe and pushing forward on a branding campaign to encourage people to buy fruits and vegetables raised in South Carolina.

Mr. Weathers also has the more realistic idea of what the job entails. Promoting agriculture is part of it, as is educating legislators about farmers' needs. But it's also about running the Agriculture Department, making sure you have people ready to move up when senior managers retire, for example, and working with other agencies to deliver better services more efficiently.

Mr. Bell seems to think he's running for Farm Bureau president. "I can hire a business manager," he said. "You cannot hire someone with my 30 years' experience" who was "raised by my father, who was president of the Farm Bureau for 28 years." He even wants to let the Farm Bureau do his thinking for him: Voters should elect the agriculture commissioner, he says, because the Farm Bureau says so; he'll consider changing his position if the bureau changes its position.

Mr. Weathers, on the other hand, supports letting the governor name the agriculture director, just as he names the insurance and corrections directors.

Stability can be an overly hyped value in state government, but change just for the sake of change doesn't usually make sense either. You particularly need a good reason to shake up an agency that had one leader for two decades and now faces the prospect of a fourth director in as many years. That reason does not exist.