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Rep. Dan Cooper presented with David Wilkins award

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COLUMBIA – Rep. Dan Cooper first met then-Rep. David Wilkins in 1990, when Republicans were still a minority party in the Statehouse and Wilkins chaired the House Judiciary Committee.

On Monday evening, hundreds turned out to watch Cooper, now chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, be presented with the David Wilkins Award for Legislative Excellence.

“This is a very big honor,” Cooper said beforehand. “It means a lot to me to win an award that has the criteria that they have set out in this.”

The annual award recognizes a state lawmaker who embodies the highest principles of leadership based on integrity, compassion, vision, civility and courage.

“I don’t think there is any doubt that he more than qualifies for whatever criteria you want to give,” said Wilkins, who served 15 years with Cooper, became House speaker and left to become U.S. ambassador to Canada. “He’s done a great job.”

Cooper, who turns 49 today, was the first Republican legislator elected from Anderson County. He was elected chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, responsible for drafting the House version of the budget, in 2005. He also sits on the five-member State Budget and Control Board, which oversees state spending.

“He’s in one of the toughest positions in state government as chair of Ways and Means during a terrible budget year,” Wilkins said. “By all accounts, he handles that job with a lot of compassion, a lot of professionalism and I think he’s doing a great job.”

Broadcast journalist Judy Woodruff was the keynote speaker at the event, which was sponsored by the Riley Institute at Furman University, named after Furman graduate, former governor and former U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley.

Past winners of the award, created in 2005, include House Speaker Bobby Harrell, Senate Finance Committee Chairman Hugh Leatherman, Rep. Gilda Cobb-Hunter and Senate President Pro Tempore Emeritus John Drummond.