

CONGRESSIONAL BRIEFING

Outside Inquiry Posed for House Ethics Flap

The result of a spate of ethics controversies involving House members is that "we are witnessing a rapid deterioration of the public's trust in Congress," says Rep. Joseph J. DioGuardi.

The New York Republican's solution is a bill he has introduced with Rep. Barney Frank, a Massachusetts Democrat, to assign investigative responsibilities now vested in the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct to an independent Public Review Board composed of six persons who are not members of Congress, three chosen by the speaker and three by the minority leader. The board would present findings to the standards committee, which would transmit them to the full House.

"There's an institutional collegiality inherent in the House, where members naturally operate in a closely knit, familial-type atmosphere," says DioGuardi. "And I don't think we can realistically expect to call on members to disregard their personal relationships and then judge their fellow colleagues, and then have the public buy that."

The conservative two-term member says he worked to enlist the liberal Frank "to signal my intent to be nonpartisan" and praises the chairman of the Judiciary Subcommittee on Administrative Law and Governmental Relations for his "intellectual honesty" on ethics matters.



STAN BAROUH / PHOTO STORE

DioGuardi: Coziness belies scrutiny.

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Independent House Ethics Panel Proposed

Associated Press

Two members of Congress yesterday unveiled legislation that would establish an independent public advisory panel to investigate alleged unethical practices by House members.

Reps. Joseph DioGuardi (R-N.Y.) and Barney Frank (D-Mass.) also proposed creating the office of an independent inspector general to audit financial matters of the House and its members.

"What we're trying to deal with here is the perception that congressmen are not fulfilling their public trust," DioGuardi said. "This is not an issue of individuals, this is not an issue of parties or politics. This is basically an issue of process."

DioGuardi and Frank stressed the conflicts inherent in the current system under which House members police themselves through the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct. That committee, composed of an equal number of Republicans and Democrats, enforces the code of conduct and recommends to the full House sanctions against members who violate it.

"Is it fair to expect congressmen and congresswomen to change their role from one of collegiality to judge and jury?" DioGuardi said.

The two congressmen introduced a resolution to create a panel of six people, three chosen by the House speaker and three by the minority leader, to investigate alleged wrongdoings.

No member could be a current or past congressman; a relative of a congressman, officer or employee of any government; a lobbyist or registered foreign agent.

The board would have full investigative powers, including the ability to issue subpoenas. It would report its findings to the ethics committee, which would be required to pass them on to the full House unchanged.

The inspector general would periodically audit the House's financial operations, including payroll and official expenses. He or she would report any waste, fraud or abuse to the public review board for action.