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Outside ethics panel urged for House

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WASHINGTON - In the wake of criticism that Congress is unable to police itself on ethics, two congressmen yesterday formally proposed establishing an independent panel to investigate complaints of unethical behavior by House members.

The six-person panel would be composed of people who are not members of Congress, with three appointed by the speaker and three by the minority leader.

The sponsors of the legislation, Reps. Barney Frank (D-Mass.) and Joseph DioGuardi (R-N.Y.), said an independent panel would be in a better position to judge the ethics of congressmen, replacing the current system, in which congressmen investigate their peers.

However, because the Constitution requires Congress to discipline itself, the independent panel would refer its findings to the House eth-

ics committee, composed of an equal number of Democrats and Republicans, which then would recommend sanctions to the full House.

The proposal, applying only to the House, comes in the wake of criticism that the ethics committee is too partisan to investigate complaints of unethical behavior by House Speaker Jim Wright (D-Texas). The ethics committee, formally the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct, has a record of being slow to investigate or reprimand congressmen.

The Ethics Committee recently came under fire from Republicans when it hired a lawyer who had been involved in Democratic Party politics to investigate Wright.

Frank and DioGuardi stressed that the legislation was not intended to undermine or critique the work of the House Ethics Committee. DioGuardi, summarizing the problem with the current system, said, "Is it fair to expect congressmen and congresswomen to change their role from one of collegiality to judge and jury?"