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Major parties criticize ad reform proposal

By Michael Fibison

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MINNEAPOLIS — Top leaders of the state's major political parties criticized on Thursday a plan designed to stop mudslinging and attack ads in the 1996 political campaign, while a third-party leader praised the effort.

Proposed by Minneapolis advertising executive Lee Lynch, the self-regulating campaign reform met with broad support from members of the Citizen League gathered Thursday night at a forum also sponsored by the Minnesota News Council.

"Is there a need for change?" said Lynch, a founder of Carmichael Lynch Advertising. A decline in voter turnout and public malaise indicate a need, he said. Lynch cited the now infamous Willie Horton presidential ad campaign in 1988 as an example of the distortion negative ads bring to a political race.

But we can't go back to the way political advertising was done in the past, said Gary Gilson, executive director of the news council. "We have been weaned away from that culturally" in the age of television, he said.

The reform measures are intended to prevent gross caricature, distortion and tasteless attacks, such as new technology that allows a candidate's image to be "morphed" into a dog in a TV ad.

And while the proposal aims at boosting campaign dialogue

and focusing on issues, something voters have indicated they want from a political campaign in poll after poll, the plan met with opposition from a panel of political operatives and media leaders.

"It's a wonderful idea, but the Titanic was a wonderful idea," said long-time Minnesota political consultant D.J. Leary. He said Americans abuse their freedoms, but that doesn't necessarily mean they should be limited in a free society.

Leary was joined in his criticism of the plan, which would ask candidates to sign a Campaign Advertising Code agreement, by state Republican Party leader Chris Georgacas.

His DFL counterpart, Steve Hildebrandt, seemed more open to the plan, while not wholeheartedly supporting its six planks. "My biggest concern is not being able to use the likeness of the opponent," he said.

But Independence Party leader Dean Barkley, who has run in several statewide races, said his party already has the same rules the code puts forth adopted into its bylaws. "I put the challenge to the two other parties" to match these standards, Barkley said.

In addition to denying the use of opponent photos and refusing independent expenditures, the proposal would require candidates to take full responsibility for all ads, have their presence dominate TV and radio ads, and post the campaign code's seal on all campaign literature.