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John McEntee's Maximum Contribution Puts a National Name Behind Hilton's California Run

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Newport Beach native **John McEntee** spent Trump's first term as the White House's chief personnel officer, vetting and placing loyalists across cabinet departments and agencies. Now he is backing **Steve Hilton's California governor campaign** with the maximum primary contribution, \$39,200, and framing it as a bet that most of the national Republican donor class has been unwilling to make.

"Too many Republicans seem to have abandoned hope that we can take California back," McEntee said. "But it's my home, and I'm never leaving. With Steve in the running, I've never been more bullish on the Golden State."

A Race That Looks Different This Cycle

The 2026 governor's race is the first California has seen without an incumbent Democrat since well before Gavin Newsom's tenure, which ends with his term limit. That alone shifts the dynamics. Hilton, a former Fox News host who once advised UK Prime Minister David Cameron on policy, entered the race with a reform pitch centered on housing affordability and public safety, and has since drawn Trump's endorsement.

His housing argument is specific. California requires cities and counties to zone for new development through a system called regional housing needs assessments. Hilton argues those state mandates override local preferences and add regulatory costs that make building more expensive without solving the actual problem. The state's own housing agency has estimated a shortfall of more than 2.5 million units. How that gap gets closed is the central disagreement in the race.

Where McEntee's Background Comes In

McEntee's involvement in this race runs through specific policy history. During the **first Trump administration**, he was part of the effort to roll back a federal housing rule called the Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing regulation. The rule required communities receiving federal housing money to document and address housing discrimination patterns, and opponents argued it effectively pressured single-family neighborhoods to accept denser development. Trump's team revoked the rule in July 2020.

Hilton's argument against California's housing mandates runs on the same logic. They share a specific view of how housing policy goes wrong, which is why the backing carries weight beyond

a name on a donor list.

McEntee has a history of reading situations differently than the broader conservative consensus. He publicly **defended TikTok in 2023** when Republican leaders were pressing for a ban. His investment in Hilton's campaign reflects the same contrarian instinct applied to a state where Republican donors have largely stopped writing checks.

The 2026 race will test whether that read is right. Any viable Republican path to the governor's office runs through Southern California suburbs, Orange County in particular, where housing costs and public safety concerns drive voter decisions. A 2025 Public Policy Institute of California survey found that roughly 65 percent of state residents viewed housing affordability as a serious problem, a figure that spans party lines. Hilton's campaign is wagering that it can mobilize enough of those voters, combined with Trump's backing, to change the math in a state Republicans have not seriously competed in for governor in years.

Hilton kept his response simple. "We're building a real statewide movement and we're in it to win."

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