

## Politics &amp; Policy

## APEC: San Francisco accepts \$4.6M from Graton Casino, hits \$20M fundraising goal



The interior of Graton Casino and Resort in Rohnert Park in 2013 | George Rose/Getty Images

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By **Josh Koehn**

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Temperatures may be sweltering in San Francisco this week, but the heat appears to be temporarily off the mayor and other city officials when it comes to footing the bill for next month's Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit of global leaders.

APEC officials and a spokesperson for Mayor London Breed confirmed on Friday that the city surpassed its \$20 million fundraising goal for the weeklong geopolitical summit, which will be hosting President Joe Biden, more than a dozen heads of state, tens of thousands of foreign delegates, hundreds of foreign press members and as many as 1,200 CEOs attending an accompanying business conference.

The city will be under the international microscope from Nov. 12-18 as it hosts important meetings and panels, and local officials see the summit—as well as no shortage of corresponding parties and dinners—as an opportunity to rebrand San Francisco's image beyond the headlines and viral videos that have cast the city in a negative light in recent years.

Graton Casino & Resort—located an hour and a half north of the city in Rohnert Park—committed to a massive \$4,625,000 sponsorship last week to help push the city above its fundraising goal. The money will go toward a series of events, including a City

Hall dinner for the foreign press and an outdoor concert by Chase Center. The casino, which is owned and operated by the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, has become a major player in California and Democratic politics in recent years after spending tens of millions on political campaigns.



A 200-room luxury hotel was added to the massive Graton Casino & Resort outside Rohnert Park as viewed in 2016. | George Rose/Getty Images

Breed told [Bloomberg](#), which was first to report the donation, that the casino will get “top” billing among all sponsors after giving more than twice the amount of the second-highest donor, crypto company Ripple, and almost five times as much as Apple, Kaiser Permanente, Salesforce, Visa and other top sponsors.

Greg Sarris, chairman of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, said in a statement that the casino is “dedicated to social justice and environmental stewardship,” and he believes the sponsorship will give the casino a chance to promote its business model on “the world stage.”

However, not everyone in San Francisco is especially keen on the city leaning so heavily on gambling interests to throw parties and woo foreign investments and tourism, especially in light of the complex issues around gambling addiction in many Asian American communities.

Kent Woo, executive director of the NICOS Chinese Health Coalition in San Francisco, called the city’s decision to accept the \$4.6 million sponsorship “disturbing.”

## San Francisco APEC Fundraising Donors

San Francisco sought to raise \$20 million to help host the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit Nov. 12-18.

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	Donor	Amount
1	Graton Rancheria	\$4,625,000
2	Ripple	\$2,000,000
3	MEBO International	\$1,000,000
4	Prologis	\$1,000,000
5	Sutter Health	\$1,000,000
6	Salesforce	\$1,000,000
7	Visa	\$1,000,000
8	Kaiser Permanente	\$1,000,000
9	Emerson Collective	\$1,000,000
10	Apple	\$1,000,000

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SOURCE: CITY OF SAN FRANCISCO



Woo pointed to a study conducted by his organization—a coalition of more than 30 health and human service groups founded in 1985—that found gambling was the biggest social issue in more than two-thirds of Chinese American households in San Francisco. A [New York Times report](#) last year found that “people of Asian descent are among the demographics most targeted by casinos.”

“It’s been an open secret among the community that gambling has ruined so many families and done so much harm in the community in general,” Woo said.

He noted that the sponsorship fits a pattern of Graton Casino going out of its way to target the city’s Chinese American community, including its lead role in sponsoring last month’s [Autumn Moon Festival](#) and the annual [Lunar New Year festivities](#).

In a web page specifically focusing on its support for Asian Americans, Graton Casino noted that it worked with the city’s Chinatown Community Development Center to distribute mooncakes to impoverished residents of Chinatown’s single-room occupancy apartments.

The people “not only received the mooncakes but also felt the holiday warmth,” [the web page](#) reads.

Woo accused city officials of bowing to the pressure to pay for APEC by “normalizing” gambling in a community that is particularly harmed.

“A lot of folks don’t realize that when they’re seduced by the money, they’re informally endorsing the casino,” he said.

### 'A Double-Edged Sword'

Supervisor Aaron Peskin, whose district includes Chinatown and who has led efforts to invest in gambling addiction services in the city, was surprised to learn Graton Casino was committing so much money to the city’s fundraising efforts.

“I think it will leave San Francisco with the responsibility to deal with any additional impacts of problem gambling,” Peskin said.

He noted that Graton Casino has “had an advertising footprint in San Francisco as long as I can remember, but in the same breath, I’m hoping they defray San Francisco’s costs. It’s a double-edged sword.”

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Priya David Clemens, a spokesperson for the city's APEC host committee, noted that Graton has supported other organizations in the city such as the Boys and Girls Club and the Gay Men's Chorus.

"They have been giving philanthropically," Clemens said. She declined to comment on the issues raised by Woo and was unaware of the city putting any of the casino funds toward gambling addiction services.

Since 2020, the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria have been a significant player in political spending, particularly on the state level. The tribe spent more than \$30 million to defeat a proposition last year that would have legalized online betting in California. A competing proposition seeking to give California tribes control of online betting also failed.

Altogether, Native American tribes and the gambling industry spent a record high of almost \$600 million on the two propositions shot down by voters.

The Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria has also made other major contributions to Democratic Party causes, including \$100,000 to the Bay Area Legislative Leaders PAC and \$5 million in support of a ballot measure by state Senate President Pro Tem Toni Atkins, who is running for lieutenant governor in 2026.

Closer to home, the tribe spent almost \$194,000 supporting Jackie Fielder's candidacy for state Senate in a 2020 race she lost to Scott Wiener. Fielder, an Indigenous woman and progressive activist, is now running to be the next supervisor to represent San Francisco's Mission District.

This spring, the tribe gave \$5,500 to reelection committees for both Wiener and Assemblymember Matt Haney, both of whom represent San Francisco.

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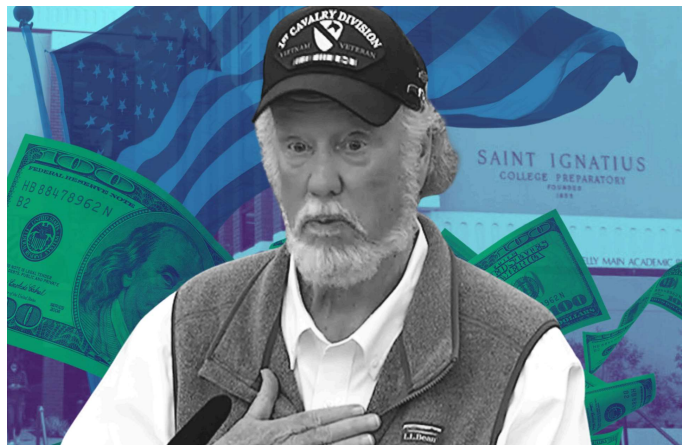
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