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**UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA**

SECURITIES AND EXCHANGE
COMMISSION,

vs.

LOUIS SCHOOLER and FIRST
FINANCIAL PLANNING CORPORATION
d/b/a WESTERN FINANCIAL PLANNING
CORPORATION,

Plaintiff,

Defendant.

CASE NO. 12-CV-2164-LAB-JMA

**PRELIMINARY INJUNCTION
ORDER**

The SEC filed a complaint against Schooler and Western Financial on September 4, and on September 6 it applied for a temporary restraining order. The Court entered a TRO that same day. After denying Defendants’ motion to dissolve the TRO and hearing oral argument—after which the parties attempted to reach a settlement and failed—the Court must now decide whether to convert the TRO into a preliminary injunction.

As the Court explains in some detail below, it will grant the SEC’s motion for a preliminary injunction, but on a more limited basis than it tentatively offered at the preliminary injunction hearing.

I. Legal Standard

In the typical case, “[a] plaintiff seeking a preliminary injunction must establish that he is likely to succeed on the merits, that he is likely to suffer irreparable harm in the absence of preliminary relief, that the balance of equities tips in his favor, and that an injunction is in the public interest.” *Winter v. Natural Res. Def. Council, Inc.*, 555 U.S. 7, 20 (2008). This is the standard the Defendants would have the Court apply. Not only that, but Defendants

1 urge the Court to, in essence, stack standards. Because the SEC would have to make its
2 case at trial by “clear and convincing evidence,” Defendants argue that the SEC must now
3 establish not only that it is likely to succeed on the merits, but that it is likely to do so *by clear*
4 *and convincing evidence*.¹

5 The SEC is of a very different mind. It isn’t, after all, the typical private litigant, but a
6 “statutory guardian charged with safeguarding the public interest in enforcing the securities
7 laws.” *SEC v. Mgmt. Dynamics, Inc.*, 515 F.2d 801, 808 (2d Cir. 1975). Indeed, the Second
8 Circuit in *Mgmt. Dynamics* called it a “crucial error” to “assum[e] that SEC enforcement
9 actions seeking injunctions are governed by criteria identical to those which apply in private
10 injunction suits.” *Id.* at 808. It explained that while injunctive relief in private actions is
11 “rooted wholly in the equity jurisdiction of the federal court,” SEC suits for injunctive relief are
12 “creatures of statute.” *Id.* That’s true. See 15 U.S.C. §§ 77t(b), 78u(d). The statutes,
13 however, don’t provide the exact standard to be applied; they merely authorize district courts
14 to grant injunctive relief “upon a proper showing.”

15 What is the standard, then, if not the *Winter* standard? According to the SEC, it need
16 only establish: (1) a prima facie case that Defendants have violated the securities laws; and
17 (2) a reasonable likelihood that their violations will be repeated. There is some authority for
18 this. See *SEC v. Unique Fin. Concepts, Inc.*, 196 F.3d 1195, 1199 n.2 (11th Cir. 1999)
19 (“Under 20(b) of the Securities Act of 1933, and Section 21(d) of the Securities Exchange Act
20 of 1934, the SEC is entitled to a preliminary injunction when it establishes the following: (1)
21 a prima facie case of previous violations of federal securities laws, and (2) a reasonable
22 likelihood that the wrong will be repealed.”); *SEC v. Bravata*, 763 F.Supp.2d 891, 918 (E.D.
23 Mich. 2011) (applying *Unique Fin. Concepts* standard); *SEC v. Homestead Props., L.P.*,

24
25 ¹ The Court isn’t sure where Defendants get this “clear and convincing” language. In
26 fact, “[i]n a civil enforcement proceeding, the SEC must prove a violation of the relevant
27 statute or rule by a preponderance of the evidence.” *SEC v. Colonial Inv. Mgmt. LLC*, 381
28 Fed.Appx. 27, 28 (2d Cir. 2010). So, even assuming the Court were inclined to stack
standards, it would ask whether the SEC is likely to succeed on the merits *by a*
preponderance of the evidence. Perhaps the explanation is that, according to Defendants,
clear and convincing evidence is required to establish the scienter element of securities
fraud. (See Tr. at 29:6–10.)

1 2009 WL 5173685 at *2 (C.D. Cal. Dec. 18, 2009) (same); *SEC v. Shiner*, 268 F.Supp.2d
2 1333, 1340 (S.D. Fla. 2003) (same); *SEC v. Phoenix Telecom, LLC*, 239 F.Supp.2d 1292,
3 1296 (N.D. Ga. 2000) (same). The Court will follow this precedent.²

4 II. Discussion

5 The big issue in this case is whether interests in the general partnerships organized
6 by Defendants are securities, which they must be in order to trigger the SEC's enforcement
7 authority. If they are, Defendants are certainly on the hook for the unregistered offer and
8 sale of securities, and, depending on the facts, they may be on the hook for securities fraud
9 as well. At the preliminary injunction hearing, the Court indicated a willingness to: (1) make
10 a preliminary finding that the general partnership interests are securities; and (2) grant

11
12 ² The Court acknowledges there is not clear uniformity on the standard to be applied.
13 For example, the Ninth Circuit has held that “[i]n statutory enforcement cases where the
14 government has met the ‘probability of success’ prong of the preliminary injunction test, we
15 presume it has met the ‘possibility of irreparable injury’ prong because the passage of the
16 statute is itself an implied finding by Congress that violations will harm the public.” *United*
17 *States v. Nutri-cology, Inc.*, 982 F.2d 394, 398 (9th Cir. 1992). Here, the implication is that
18 a modified *Winter* standard applies, the difference being that the second prong drops out.
19 This presumably leaves the party seeking injunctive relief to establish a likelihood of success
20 on the merits, that the balance of equities tips in its favor, and that an injunction is in the
21 public interest. But this seems odd. If irreparable harm may be presumed because the
22 statute itself is an implied finding that it's present, then it seems the public interest prong
23 should also be presumed.

24 Moreover, district courts in California have deviated from the two-part *Unique Fin.*
25 *Concepts* standard. See, e.g., *SEC v. Small Bus. Capital Corp.*, Case No. 12-CV-3237, Doc.
26 No. 34 (N.D. Cal. July 10, 2012) (granting injunctive where good cause existed to believe
27 defendants violated the securities laws and the SEC demonstrated a probability of success
28 on the merits); *SEC v. Private Equity Mgmt.*, Case No. 9-CV-2901, Doc. No. 246 (C.D. Cal.
Aug. 4, 2009) (granting injunctive relief where good cause existed to believe defendants
violated the securities laws, SEC demonstrated a probability of success on the merits, and
good cause existed to believe defendants would continue to violate the securities laws “to
the immediate and irreparable loss and damage to investors and to the general public”); *SEC*
v. Learn Waterhouse, Case No. 4-CV-2037, Doc. No. 29 (S.D. Cal. Nov. 1, 2004) (same).
The problem is that the courts in these cases simply entered proposed orders with boilerplate
language that were submitted by the SEC, and in at least one case the preliminary injunction
was not contested. These cases are therefore not useful guides here.

A different standard from the one the Court will apply prevails in the Second Circuit.
There, “injunctions sought by the SEC do not require a showing of irreparable harm or the
unavailability of remedies at law. Rather, the SEC need only make a substantial showing of
likelihood of success as to both a current violation and the risk of repetition.” *Smith v. SEC*,
653 F.3d 121, 127–28 (2d Cir. 2011) (internal quotations omitted).

While Defendants urge the Court to apply the *Winter* standard, they haven't identified
a single SEC enforcement action seeking injunctive relief that imported it. In fact, they cite
Mgmt. Dynamics, which the court in *Unique Fin. Concepts* relied on in coming up with the
two-part standard for injunctive relief that the Court will follow here. See *Unique Fin.*
Concepts, 196 F.3d at 1199 n.2 (citing *Mgmt. Dynamics*, 515 F.2d at 806–07).

1 injunctive relief on that limited basis. This way, the SEC could get its injunctive relief (and
2 accompanying asset freeze), while the Defendants would be spared the embarrassment of
3 a judicial finding, albeit a preliminary one, that they'd possibly engaged in fraud.

4 The basis for the Court's Order is divided into two parts. First, the Court summarizes
5 the law on when general partnership interests qualify as securities. Here, the seminal case
6 is *Williamson v. Tucker*, 645 F.2d 404, 418 (5th Cir. 1981), which articulated a three-factor
7 test for making this determination. Second, the Court applies the *Williamson* test to the facts
8 of this case and determines whether the SEC has made out a prima facie case that the
9 general partnership interests sold by Western are securities.

10 **A. Legal Background**

11 From the beginning, the Defendants have taken the firm position that the general
12 partnership interests are not securities. Most recently, Defendants argued that "the case law
13 over many decades has consistently held that there is a presumption that (1) interests in
14 general partnerships are not securities, and (2) interests in raw land held solely for market
15 appreciation are not securities." (Doc. No. 34 at 2–3.) That's true. See *SEC v. Merchant*
16 *Capital, LLC*, 483 F.3d 747, 755 (11th Cir. 2007) ("A general partnership interest is presumed
17 not to be an investment contract because a general partner typically takes an active part in
18 managing the business and therefore does not rely solely on the efforts of others."); *Shiner*,
19 268 F.Supp.2d at 1340 ("The general rule is that units in general partnerships are not
20 investment contracts and therefore not securities under federal law."); *McConnell v. Frank*
21 *Howard Allen & Co.*, 574 F.Supp. 781, 784 (N.D. Cal. 1983) ("There is persuasive authority
22 for the position that if an investor in a real estate syndicate expects profits to come solely
23 from the general appreciation of property values, then the investment is not a security.").

24 But like any presumption, the presumption that general partnership interests aren't
25 securities can be overcome, and therefore has limited independent force. Here's why. The
26 securities laws define "security" to include an "investment contract." The Supreme Court, in
27 1946, defined an investment contract as "a contract, transaction or scheme whereby a
28 person invests his money in a common enterprise and is led to expect profits solely from the

1 efforts of the promoter or a third party.” *SEC v. W.J. Howey Co.*, 328 U.S. 293, 298–99
2 (1946). This requirement—that profits be expected “solely” from the efforts of the
3 promoter—“has been given a liberal reading.” *McConnell*, 574 F.Supp at 784. Emphasizing
4 this point, the Ninth Circuit has even dropped the term “solely” from the investment contract
5 test. See *Burnett v. Rowzee*, 2007 WL 2809769 at *4 (C.D. Cal. Sept. 26, 2007) (citing
6 *Hocking v. Dubois*, 885 F.2d 1449, 1455 (9th Cir. 1989)). The question is “whether the
7 efforts made by those other than the investor are the undeniably significant ones, those
8 essential managerial efforts which effect the failure or success of the enterprise.” *SEC v.*
9 *Glenn W. Turner Enters., Inc.*, 474 F.2d 476, 482 (9th Cir. 1973). And most importantly,
10 “[t]he Supreme Court has repeatedly emphasized that economic reality is to govern over form
11 and that the definitions of the various types of securities should not hinge on exact and literal
12 tests.” *Williamson*, 645 F.2d at 418; see also *Howey*, 328 U.S. at 1102 (“Form was
13 disregarded for substance and emphasis was placed on economic reality.”).

14 Indeed, “[a] scheme which sells investments to inexperienced and unknowledgeable
15 members of the general public cannot escape the reach of the securities laws merely by
16 labeling itself a general partnership or joint venture.” *Williamson*, 645 F.2d at 423. See also
17 *Holden v. Hagopian*, 978 F.2d 1115, 1119 n.3 (9th Cir. 1992) (“In determining whether
18 interests are investment contracts, we focus on the economic realities of the underlying
19 transaction and not the name it carries.”). The definition of an investment contract must
20 therefore be “flexible rather than . . . static” and “capable of adaptation to meet the countless
21 and variable schemes devised by those who seek the use of the money of other on the
22 promise of profits.” *Howey*, 328 U.S. at 299.

23 The Fifth Circuit in *Williamson* devised an operational test for an investment contract
24 that’s since been widely followed.

25 A general partnership or joint venture interest can be designated
26 a security if the investor can establish, for example, that (1) an
27 agreement among the parties leaves so little power in the hands
28 of the partner or venturer that the arrangement in fact distributes
power as would a limited partnership; or (2) the partner or
venturer is so inexperienced and unknowledgeable in business
affairs that he is incapable of intelligently exercising his
partnership or venture powers; or (3) the partner or venturer is

1 so dependent on some unique entrepreneurial or managerial
2 ability of the promoter or manager that he cannot replace the
3 manager of the enterprise or otherwise exercise meaningful
4 partnership or venture powers.

5 *Williamson*, 645 F.2d at 424. The Ninth Circuit has expressly adopted the *Williamson* test.
6 See *Koch v. Hawkins*, 928 F.2d 1471, 1476–78 (9th Cir. 1991). Under this test, it's important
7 to recognize, the focus is on investors' expectations when they originally invest, not "what
8 actually transpires after the investment is made, i.e., whether the investor later decides to be
9 passive or to delegate all powers and duties to a promoter or managing partner." *Id.* at 1477;
10 *Holden*, 978 F.2d at 1119 n.6; *Merchant Capital*, 483 F.3d at 756 ("We analyze the
11 expectations of control at the time the investment is sold, rather than at some later time after
12 the expectations of control have developed or evolved."). This principle descends from the
13 statement in *Williamson* that "[a]n investor who is offered an interest in a general partnership
14 or joint venture should be on notice . . . that his ownership rights are significant, and that the
15 federal securities acts will not protect him from a mere failure to exercise his rights."
16 *Williamson*, 645 F.2d at 422.

17 In applying the *Williamson* test, the Court must look beyond the general partnership
18 agreements themselves, "to other documents structuring the investment, to promotional
19 materials, to oral representations made by the promoters at the time of the investment, and
20 to the practical possibility of the investors exercising the powers they possessed pursuant
21 to the partnership agreement." *Koch*, 928 F.2d at 1478; *Merchant Capital*, 483 F.3d at 756
22 ("Consistent with *Howey's* focus on substance over form, we look at all the representations
23 made by the promoter in marketing the interests, not just at the legal agreements underlying
24 the sale of the interest.").

25 **B. The *Williamson* Test**

26 The presence of any *one Williamson* factor renders an investment contract a security.
27 *Merchant Capital*, 483 F.3d at 755. And while technically the factors aren't exhaustive,
28 courts have certainly treated them as such in making the determination with which this Court
is now faced. See, e.g., *Merchant Capital*, 483 F.3d at 757–66 (considering each *Williamson*
factor in sequence before concluding that partnership interest was a security); *Koch*, 928

1 F.2d at 1478 (We therefore . . . apply all three *Williamson* factors in evaluating whether the
2 investors expected profits produced by the efforts of others so as to satisfy the third element
3 of *Howey*.”).

- 4 1. **“An agreement among the parties leaves so little power in the
5 hands of the partner or venturer that the arrangement in fact
6 distributes power as would a limited partnership.”**

7 This first *Williamson* factor “is addressed to the legal powers afforded the investor by
8 the formal documents without regard to the practical impossibility of the investors invoking
9 them.” *Koch*, 928 F.2d at 1478. If investors’ powers are merely theoretical, even, their
10 general partnership interest may still not qualify as a security on this factor. *See Holden*, 978
11 F.2d at 1119–20 (“Under the first prong of the *Williamson* test our inquiry is limited to an
12 examination of the legal powers afforded the investor by the partnership agreement and
13 other formal documents that comprised the partnership agreement or arrangement.”).

14 In the Court’s judgment the SEC’s analysis of this factor misses the mark. Rather
15 than focus on the formal documents of the general partnerships and assess the investors’
16 power vis-a-vis that of Defendants, the SEC highlights how little control the so-called
17 “Signatory Partners” exercised in reality, and their relative lack of sophistication. It also
18 highlights how little the general partnerships required of the investors, which is obviously a
19 separate question from what their formal powers were under the general partnership
20 agreements.

21 The SEC’s best argument here is that the mere size of the general partnerships cuts
22 against any claim on the part of Defendants that the investors maintained meaningful control
23 over their investments. The court in *Williamson* did recognize that “one would not expect
24 partnership interests sold to large numbers of the general public to provide any real
25 partnership control; at some point there would be so many partners that a partnership vote
26 would be more like a corporate vote, each partner’s role having been diluted to the level of
27 a single shareholder in a corporation.” *Williamson*, 645 F.2d at 423. There are still a couple
28 of problems. First, the number of investors in a general partnership has little to do with the
formal powers that are given to the investors in the partnership documents. Second,

1 *Williamson* also recognized that a large number of general partnership interests “might well”
2 be evidence of an investment contract, meaning there is rigid rule with respect to partnership
3 numbers. For example, the Ninth Circuit in *Koch* faced 35 general partnerships comprising
4 a total of 160 investors, collectively operating a jojoba plantation, and it found that “[e]ven
5 though each investor’s absolute control is reduced by the voting structure, the general
6 partners as a legal matter do have the sort of influence [within] the partnership] which
7 generally provides them with access to important information and protection against a
8 dependence on others.” *Koch*, 928 F.2d at 1479 n.12 (internal quotations omitted).

9 Defendants emphasize that they are non-voting members of any general partnership
10 in which they hold an interest, and that “any and all voting members have the ability to
11 engage and direct the partnership in whatever direction they desire.” (Doc. No. 21 at 11.)

12 For example:

13 Partnerships are provided all contact information for one another
14 to facilitate communication. And any partner may initiate a ballot
15 for a partnership vote on any matter by simply submitting a
16 request to the partnership secretary. The secretary has no
17 discretion regarding any ballot request—she simply serves as a
18 messenger coordinating the efficient distribution of a ballot to all
19 members on any matter any partner desires to be addressed by
20 the partnership.

21 The partnerships like any general partnerships can take any
22 action they want with a proper vote of the partners and cannot
23 take any action not duly authorized by a vote of the partners of
24 set forth in the terms of the partnership agreement.

25 (*Id.*) The Court doesn’t have good cause to doubt this—even if in practice the investors’
26 powers are illusory. It is clear in the caselaw that, with respect to the first *Williamson* factor,
27 what courts look for is a partnership agreement that plainly gives the promoter or manager
28 a power advantage over the investors. See, e.g., *Burnett*, 2007 WL 2809769 at *5 (finding
that an LLC membership interest was a security where operating agreement installed
defendant-promoter as sole manager and gave him full authority and discretion to manage
the LLC, sign documents, recommend investments, solicit money, and so forth). By contrast,
where partnership acts may only be taken upon a majority vote of the partners, where the
manager’s role is ministerial, and where the partnership retains the power to dismiss its

1 manager, the first *Williamson* factor may not be present. See, e.g., *Holden*, 978 F.2d at
2 1120. The Court in *Holden* reached precisely this conclusion because:

3 A substantial number of partnership acts may be taken only after
4 a majority vote of the partners to wit: all decisions respecting
5 partnership business; the transfer, sale, or encumbrance of
6 partnership interests; compensation of a partner for work on
7 behalf of the partnership; and the empowerment and direction of
8 one or more partners or an agent to negotiate and conclude
9 sales of property. Furthermore, any amendment of the articles
10 of partnership requires approval of sixty percent of the partners,
11 while seventy-five percent of the partnership has the power to
12 close the partnership once it has retained a certain amount of
capital. Finally, partners retained reasonable access to the
partnership books maintained at KTA's office

Partners also retain substantial authority under the terms of
Hagopian's employment contract. The contract itself limits
Hagopian's functions to clerical and ministerial tasks, and his
authority to enter into contracts or to make promises on behalf
of the partnership is circumscribed by requiring KTA's express,
written authority.

13 *Id.* The Court finds the facts of this case are closer to those of *Holden* than *Burnett*.

14 Defendants submitted a sample, representative partnership agreement with their
15 emergency motion to dissolve the TRO. (See Doc. No. 14-1.) The agreement gives general
16 partners the right to access the partnership's books.³ (*Id.* at ¶ 2.6.) It provides that a majority
17 in interest may vote to remove the Signatory Partners. (*Id.* at ¶ 4.2.3.) A majority in interest
18 must also vote to admit new partners to the partnership. (*Id.* at ¶ 4.5.) All partnership
19 decisions must be made by a majority in interest vote. (*Id.* at ¶ 5.1.2.) "Any Partner,
20 including Non-Voting Partners, may request a vote of the Partnership on any matter relevant
21 to the business and operation of the Partnership." (*Id.* at ¶ 5.2.2.) Partners' contact
22 information, under the agreement, is circulated to all members. (*Id.* at ¶ 5.4.) While
23 Defendants are appointed partnership administrators under the agreement, they may be
24 terminated, with or without cause, by a majority vote. (*Id.* at 7.1.4.) A majority in interest

25
26 ³ While the court in *Holden* made something out of the fact that general partners had
27 a right to access the partnership's books, the Court in *Merchant Capital* found this fact to
28 have no "independent salience." *Merchant Capital*, 483 F.3d at 761. This doesn't undermine
the Court's reliance on *Holden*, however, because what the court in *Merchant Capital* was
truly concerned about was general partners having access to information but, at the same
time, having no recourse under a partnership agreement to do anything with that information.
Id.

1 may decide to terminate the partnership itself. (*Id.* at ¶ 9.1.) The agreement may be
2 amended upon the consent of a majority in interest of those members entitled to vote. (*Id.*
3 at ¶ 11.17.) To be clear, the Court isn't finding that the reality of the general partnerships
4 bears out the above. It is merely finding that under the formal documents the partnership
5 members don't necessarily have "so little power" that they are effectively limited partners.
6 Accordingly, it doesn't find that the SEC has made out a prima facie case that the general
7 partnership interests are securities under the first *Williamson* factor.

8 **2. "The partner or venturer is so inexperienced and unknowledgeable**
9 **in business affairs that he is incapable of intelligently exercising**
 his partnership or venture powers"

10 With this second *Williamson* factor, "[t]he proper inquiry is whether the partners are
11 inexperienced or unknowledgeable 'in business affairs' generally, not whether they are
12 experienced and sophisticated in the particular industry or area in which the partnership
13 engages they have invested." *Holden*, 978 F.2d at 1121; *Koch*, 928 F.2d at 1479.⁴

14 The SEC argues that Defendants' investors are inexperienced and unknowledgeable
15 because, among other reasons, they are members of the general public who were solicited
16 by Defendants. There is no dispute that Defendants have a sales force, comprised of
17 registered securities brokers and financial advisers, that pitch the general partnerships to
18 investors. A former securities broker and financial advisor has testified that Western's
19 securities and real estate arms operated as one, and that as a broker-advisor he was
20 encouraged (and trained) to sell the general partnership investments to clients. (Torres Decl.
21 ¶¶ 3, 5.) Schooler conceded in his deposition that Western gets its clients through its sales
22 force, which in turn relies on referrals. (Kalin Decl., Ex. 1, Schooler Dep. at 159:9–12.) He
23 admitted that Western had, in the past, purchased lead lists and made cold calls. (*Id.* at
24 159:13–160:14.) Today, he explained, the sales force uses a promotional brochure and a

25
26 ⁴ The Eleventh Circuit has gone the other way on this point: "A focus on experience
27 in the particular business is also more consistent with the *Howey* test. The ultimate question
28 is whether the investors were led to expect profits solely from the efforts of others. Regardless of investors' general business experience, where they are inexperienced in the particular business, they are likely to be relying solely on the efforts of promoters to obtain their profits." *Merchant Capital*, 483 F.3d at 762.

1 sales script that Defendants developed. (*Id.* at 160:12–161:20.)

2 The SEC has also submitted the declaration of an investor who claims he didn't know,
3 at the time of his investment, that he was becoming a partner in a venture—nor did he
4 appreciate the technical details of the investment. (Levoy Decl. ¶¶ 8, 11, 13, 14.) The Court
5 questions whether Levoy is the best declarant here for the SEC's purposes. He is the
6 Director of Human Resources at the Stanford Business School, which is a high-level position
7 at a high-level institution. One would think someone of his professional experience is at least
8 mildly sophisticated in business affairs, even if his role at Stanford is a purely administrative
9 one. Another investor, Rhea Olson, testified in a deposition that she was very confused as
10 to whether her investment was in a general partnership." (Kalin Decl., Ex. 8, Olson Dep. at
11 52:11–16.)

12 While the Court certainly understands where the SEC is going here, it shares
13 Defendants' concern that its evidence is both anecdotal and thin. The SEC points out that
14 Defendants have organized more than 100 general partnerships, some of which are made
15 up of hundreds of investors. That it has tracked down *two* who are shaky on the nature of
16 this particular investment isn't immensely persuasive.⁵ It would be different if there were
17 some categorical rule that members of the general public are presumed to be
18 unsophisticated in business affairs, or investments that are the result of a mass sales pitch
19 are presumptively securities, but the SEC doesn't point to one. As a result, the Court is left
20 guessing, really, as to the actual sophistication of the large body of Defendants' investors.
21 The SEC has certainly shown that it's possible Levoy and Olson are in the majority, but this
22 doesn't necessarily it has made out a prima facie case. The Court therefore can't find, for
23 preliminary injunction purposes, that the second *Williamson* factor is present in this case.
24 See *Koch*, 928 F.2d at 1479 (finding that where record wasn't fully developed it "simply [had]

25
26 ⁵ The SEC identified a third confused investor in its opposition to Defendants' motion
27 to dissolve the TRO. (See Kalin Decl. II, Ex. 5, Lawrence Dep. at 57:3–58:5; 64:6–65:19.)
28 This investor said, "I didn't even, I mean, still to this day I'm not necessarily sure the
particulars of what a partnership is as opposed to a group of people buying the same piece
of land all together." Going from two investors to three does not change the Court's view of
the anecdotal, thin nature of the SEC's showing on this point.

1 no basis for evaluating the sophistication of many of the investors”).

2 **3. “The partner or venturer is so dependent on some unique**
3 **entrepreneurial or managerial ability of the promoter or manager**
4 **that he cannot replace the manager of the enterprise or otherwise**
5 **exercise meaningful partnership or venture powers.”**

6 This last *Williamson* factor is the SEC’s only hope of establishing a prima facie case
7 that the general partnership interests sold by Defendants are in fact securities. Defendants’
8 argument on this issue has consistently been, in essence, that there’s no possibility for
9 dependency because all the general partners do is invest in raw land and wait for it to
10 appreciate in value. The Defendants’ duties are purely ministerial:

11 The raw land investment is pretty straightforward. The
12 partnership has to pay property taxes and insurance. It has to
13 pay an accountant to file K-1’s every year. If other issues arise,
14 the partnerships have the authority to take steps to address
15 them. But that is largely the list of events. The partnership
16 makes its payments and waits for an opportunity to sell at some
17 future date. So there are not complicated day-to-day, hour-by-
18 hour management decisions or other steps that need to be
19 taken.

20 (Doc. No. 21 at 13–14; see also Tr. at 11:11–14.) “The return on the investment is solely a
21 function of market appreciation,” Defendants argue. (Doc. No. 21 at 15.) “There is no
22 management or entrepreneurial skill that could ever have an impact on the return of
23 investment for the GPs.” (*Id.*) This is not a frivolous argument. Above all else, Defendants
24 manage the general partnerships, and *Williamson* itself recognized that “a reliance on others
25 does not exist merely because the partners have chosen to hire another party to manage
26 their investment.” *Williamson*, 645 F.2d at 423. See also *Holden*, 978 F.2d at 1120 (finding
27 that, under the first *Williamson* factor, general partners retained substantial authority when
28 agreement limited manager’s functions to “clerical and ministerial tasks”). That the manager
of the investment in this case is also the vendor doesn’t make a difference. *Williamson*, 645
F.2d at 423.

Indeed, the easier case is one in which investors contribute to a general partnership
and then a manager, at his or her discretion and with his or her expertise, does something

1 with their money.⁶ In *Merchant Capital*, for example, investors bought interests in an LLP
2 that, in turn, bought shares in debt pools, but it was the manager-defendant of the LLP who
3 decided (on information he didn't share) whether and when to buy those shares. *Merchant*
4 *Capital*, 483 F.3d at 753. The SEC argues that the facts of this case fall right into
5 *Williamson's* holding that a genuine dependence on others might exist, hypothetically, where
6 investors are "induced to enter a real estate partnership on the promise that the partnership's
7 manager has some unique understanding of the real estate market in the area in which the
8 partnership is to invest." *Williamson*, 645 F.2d at 423. This is because "the partners may
9 have the legal right to replace the manager, but they could do so only by forfeiting the
10 management ability on which the success of the venture is dependent." *Id.* The difference,
11 though, is that in both *Merchant Capital* and the *Williamson* hypothetical, the investment was
12 *prospective*. Here, by contrast, the general partnership has technically already invested at
13 the time the investors join. As the SEC explains it, "Defendants buy raw, undeveloped land
14 in the southwest United States, they organize multiple general partnerships to hold the land,
15 and then they use Western's sales force to offer interests in the GPs to investors." (Doc. No.
16 3-1 at 1.). The SEC must therefore identify some work that Defendants do, once the
17 investors are financially committed and going forward, that makes them so dependant on
18 Defendants that they can't exercise meaningful powers within the partnership.⁷

19 One thing the SEC seizes on is Defendants' role in selling the properties in which the
20 general partnerships are invested. A former broker, for example, said in a declaration that
21 he was trained to tell investors that Schooler "had great expertise" in "making decisions about

22
23 ⁶ Similarly, it is an easier case when investors put money toward a tangible asset and
24 then rely on a promoter-manager to be the stewards of it. See, e.g., *Shiner*, 268 F.Supp. at
25 1341 (investors bought units in LLPs formed to operate local telephone companies);
Phoenix Telecom, 239 F.Supp.2d at 1298 (LLC sold investments in coin-operated
26 telephones); *Albanese v. Florida Nat. Bank of Orlando*, 823 F.2d 408, 412 (11th Cir. 1987)
27 (investors purchased ice machines and relied on seller to maintain them).

28 ⁷ The Court put this question to the SEC at the preliminary injunction hearing when
it said, "Your position would be more compelling if it was, 'He's going to acquire these things
and he hasn't yet, and we're putting all of this money in and we're getting a fractional interest
in something yet to be determined.' Here they know what their fractional interest is. It's
fractional interest in a general partnership that has some assets, and the assets are
identified." (Tr. at 45:21-46:10.)

1 the best time to buy and sell land.” (Torres Decl. ¶¶ 5–6.) He also said “Western would
2 decide when to sell the land, find a buyer, and negotiate a sales price.” (*Id.* at ¶ 8.) An
3 investor—the Stanford Business School employee—said that when he spoke with
4 Defendants’ representative, he was told that “when Western believed the time was right to
5 sell the land, it would approach potential buyers and negotiate a sales price, then come back
6 to its investors for final approval.” (Levoy Decl. ¶ 9.) The SEC asserted in its opposition to
7 Defendants’ motion to dissolve the TRO that “the evidence in this case shows that Schooler
8 only presents offers that will provide a positive return on the investment, as opposed to **all**
9 offers.” (Doc. No. 18 at 4.) The deposition testimony it cites to, however, does some but not
10 all of the work the SEC enlists it to do. For example, in his own deposition the SEC tried to
11 pin Schooler down on this point and didn’t fully succeed:

12 Q: Did you share every single offer that came in with the —
13 so, if there was an offer on a particular piece of land and
14 it was way below what you thought was appropriate for
the property, would you share that offer with the
partnership?

15 A: If it’s a written offer, I have to. If it’s a letter of intent, I
16 might indicate to Mr. Schaeffer that I will send that to the
17 partnership, gladly, but I don’t believe that it’s going to be
18 accepted because it’s too low. And so, sometimes the
person making the offer would raise the price a little bit,
but, if that’s not the case, then I send it to the partnership.

19 Q: You send the letter of intent to the partnership?

20 A: Mm-hmm.

21 Q: For a vote, do you mean?

22 A: For a vote, yes. Or, there’s a ballot created that explains
the terms of the letter of intent.

23 Q: Did you ever get any verbal offers on any of these pieces
24 of land?

25 A: Verbal offers?

26 Q: Like, brokers talking to each other. You know, hey,
27 maybe I could buy the land for a certain amount of money
but it’s not a letter of intent.

28 A: I don’t remember.

Q: Did you engage in some negotiation with the potential

1 buyers?

2 A: Directly?

3 Q: Directly or through Mr. Schaeffer.

4 A: Not really. I mean, when it's a real offer, it has to go to
5 the partnership.

6 Q: I think you just mentioned that if you got a letter of intent
7 that seemed low to you, you'd tell Mr. Schaeffer to go
8 back to the -

9 A: Well, usually, there's a question that comes along with
10 that, "Do you think the partnership will take this?" And I'll
11 say, "I don't know. I don't believe so." You know, just
12 based on what they paid for it, everybody's real cognizant
13 of their time, so, you know, most buyers want to send in
14 an offer that has a chance of being accepted, but if it's a
15 formal offer, you know, a real offer, I have to give it to the
16 partnership.

17 (Kalin Decl. II, Ex. 1, Schooler Dep. at 219:11–221:5.) The Court doesn't think this testimony
18 completely clears Schooler, but neither does it completely accept the SEC's view that it
19 shows he doesn't present all offers to the partnership. Likewise, the deposition testimony
20 of Roger de Bock is suggestive, but not conclusive.

21 Q: Who would decide when to sell the land?

22 A: Since I've never had any property sell, my
23 understanding—what I was told by the sales manager is
24 if an offer is presented, say, to Louis, that he would then
25 disseminate that offer to all investors and they would have
26 the ability to vote whether to accept or decline that offer.

27 Q: Okay. And did Mr. Schooler disseminate every offer he
28 received to investors?

A: I've never seen an offer during my time with Western ever
come out. So –

Q: Okay. And during your time with Western, did Mr.
Schooler ever talk about receiving offers?

A: In – a couple of times he said people came knocking on
his door, but the offerings were — were unreasonable,
you know.

Q: Okay.

A: And this — I think he was — and the reference of that
time was the real estate market was getting beat up pretty
bad, and he implied that they were — what's the word? —

1 trying to find some fire sale deal, you know, something
2 like that.

3 Q: And do you know if he passed that offer along to all
4 investors?

5 A: I don't know that.

6 Q: Do you know who would go try to find buyers for the land?

7 A: No.

8 Q: If there was an offer, who would negotiate the deal?

9 A: My understanding is Louis Schooler was going to
10 represent the investors as — as a commercial — or
11 broker.

12 (Kalin Decl. II, Ex. 4, de Bock Dep. at 199:21–201:3.). Again, this testimony certainly
13 suggests that Schooler played an active and discretionary role in selling the general
14 partnerships' properties, but it's not absolutely conclusive. More telling, from the Court's
15 perspective, is a PowerPoint slide used in seminars to solicit investors in which Defendants
16 represented "We Make Sure You Get The Best Value For Your Investment." (Kalin Decl.,
17 Ex. 11 at 159.) It's hard to reconcile this with Defendants' position now that "it is simply
18 impossible for any one person to have any impact at all on the GP's return on the investment,
19 even if they wanted to." (Doc. No. 21 at 15.) The assurance that general partners will get
20 "the best value" for their investment imputes to Defendants some kind of expertise on which
21 the general partners will depend going forward.

22 The SEC also calls attention to investors being told that Schooler is involved with
23 various Chambers of Commerce, the implication being that he could influence development.
24 One former broker said in a declaration that his sales managers, in encouraging him to sell
25 the general partnership interests, told him that Schooler "helped to promote the land by being
26 involved in local politics regarding economic growth and development in the areas of
27 investment." (Torres Decl. ¶ 8.) The Court is inclined to agree with Defendants that mere
28 involvement with the Chambers of Commerce isn't nearly the kind of "unique entrepreneurial
or managerial ability" on the part of a promoter-manager that can make investors in a general
partnership dependent on him. Beyond this, the SEC presents no evidence that Schooler

1 actually is cozy with local politicians and able to steer economic growth in the direction of the
2 properties in which the general partnerships are invested.

3 The SEC also argues forcefully that “investors were wholly reliant on the Defendants
4 to generate returns from their investment” and that “[o]nce the investors invested their
5 money, it was solely the efforts of Schooler and Western that affected the failure or success
6 of the enterprise.” (Doc. No. 14.) The Defendants’ response to this is that their duties are
7 purely administrative, their only purpose being to keep the partnerships in existence. Their
8 counsel put it this way at the preliminary injunction hearing:

9 The General Partnership is structured so that property taxes can
10 be paid, insurance can be maintained to protect the members,
11 K-1’s have to be filed with the IRS. The General Partnership
12 agreement has provisions in it that everyone signs when they
13 enter into the investment. That spells out that those are merely
14 administrative functions So the fact that the structure sets
15 up this ability to keep it in existence is it It’s really a
16 bookkeeping administrative function and that is it.

17 (Tr. at 15:24–16:16.) Indeed, the Partnership Agreement does spell out a list of
18 responsibilities—eleven of them, to be precise—to be assumed by Schooler and his
19 management company EBS Land Co., “[f]or the purpose of facilitating the efficient and
20 orderly administration of the Partnership’s various clerical, administrative, and organizational
21 needs.” (Doc. No. 14-1 at ¶ 7–7.1.1.) These range from maintaining mailing addresses and
22 general partnership records to “[m]aintenance and administration of the Partnership and LLC
23 bank accounts” to “[p]reparing and distributing correspondences to Partners.” The SEC
24 argues that “everything from creating the GPs, to opening the GP’s bank accounts, to
25 operating the GPs, is ultimately controlled by Western.” (Doc. No. 3-1 at 4.) And the SEC
26 goes into considerable detail in describing this structure: Defendants identify Signatory
27 Partners whose only real responsibility is to sign documents on behalf of the partnerships;
28 Defendants’ own employees act as secretaries for the partnerships; Defendants file all
paperwork with the states; Defendants set up and maintain bank accounts; and Defendants
handle all of the operations. (See *id.* at 4–7.) Of course, Defendants don’t deny any of this,
but rather argue that these responsibilities are of a bookkeeping nature and
don’t create dependency on the part of investors or render Defendants irreplaceable.

1 This is a close call. On the one hand, *Williamson* recognizes that a dependency
2 relationship may exist where investors are reliant “on the managing partner’s unusual
3 experience and ability in running this particular business,” and there can’t be any doubt that
4 Schooler and Western are uniquely experienced in the area of real estate syndication and
5 partnerships. Their own promotional materials say so. (See Kalin Decl., Ex. 11 at 134;
6 Torres Decl., Ex. A at 1–2; Torres Decl., Ex. D at 28; .) Their own sales staff were trained
7 to say so. (See Torres Decl. ¶¶ 6–8.) Investors were told as much. (See Levoy Decl. ¶¶
8 6–9.) On the other hand, *Williamson* is equally clear that “[t]he delegation of rights and
9 duties—standing alone—does not give rise to the sort of dependence on others which
10 underlies the third prong of the *Howey* test.” *Williamson*, 645 F.2d at 423. It continues, “It
11 is not enough, therefore, that partners in fact rely on others for the management of their
12 investment; a partnership can be an investment contract only when the partners are so
13 dependent on a particular manager that they cannot replace him or otherwise exercise
14 ultimate control.” *Id.* at 424. In fact, the manager in *Williamson* assumed far more
15 responsibilities over the land investment than Defendants are alleged to have assumed in
16 this case, and the court still did not find a dependency relationship:

17 The closest that the plaintiffs come to the third factor consists of
18 the generalized argument that they were dependent on Godwin
19 Investments’ promise “to plan uses for the property, obtain
20 zoning changes, refinance, manage condemnation proceedings,
21 and develop, lease, or sell the property to return a profit.” It is
22 true that the property would have to be developed or sold, and
in the interim managed, before a profit could be returned on it;
and it is true that Godwin Investments promised to perform these
tasks. But this alone does not establish a dependence on
Godwin Investments so great as to deprive the plaintiffs of their
partnership powers.

23 *Id.* at 425. That is an important holding, and it cuts strongly against the SEC’s argument here
24 that Defendants’ mere handling of the operational side of the general partnerships made
25 investors so dependent on them that they couldn’t find a replacement or exercise meaningful
26 partnership powers themselves. This is all to say that the SEC’s claim that “Western would
27 take care of everything related to the land,” even if true, doesn’t on its own constitute a prima
28 facie case that the third *Williamson* factor is met. (See Doc. No. 3-1 at 15.)

1 The SEC has one other argument that it failed to develop explicitly. It is a
2 straightforward application of *Koch*. In that case, as the Court briefly explained above, 35
3 general partnerships purchased 80 acres each of a jojoba plantation that was approximately
4 2,700 acres. Critical to the Ninth Circuit’s holding that the general partnership interests were
5 potentially securities⁸ was that the 80-acre plots seemed to carry no independent value. The
6 2,700 acres had to be farmed cooperatively by all of the general partnerships for the
7 enterprise to make any economic sense, and yet each general partnership had no influence
8 beyond its own 80-acre plot. As the Ninth Circuit put it, “[t]he partnership agreement . . . only
9 provides for the exercise of general partner control and decisionmaking *within* each
10 partnership, and as to land controlled by each partnership, not as to issues concerning the
11 entire plantation.” *Koch*, 928 F.2d at 1480. Because the general partnerships only had a
12 fractional interest, then, in the underlying investment, “it would be difficult if not impossible
13 for an investor to affect the management of the plantation as a whole.” *Id.* Indeed, “even if
14 a general partner vigorously exercised his or her rights under the partnership agreement, he
15 or she arguably could have no impact on the investment (other than to ensure its failure by
16 withdrawing from the larger plantation).” *Id.* at 1481. This arrangement would, quite
17 obviously, make all investors dependent on the manager-promoter. Meaningful change
18 could only happen with the consent of *all* partnerships, and yet there was “not even a
19 formalized mechanism in the partnership agreements for attempting to effect change on
20 behalf of all thirty-five partnerships.” *Id.* at 1480.⁹

21 That’s basically the situation in this case. The general partnerships don’t own a

22
23 ⁸ The holding in *Koch* reversed a district court’s grant of summary judgment to the
24 defendant-manager. As such, the holding wasn’t that the general partnership interest at
issue was in fact a security, but rather that *that* question presented a triable question of fact.

25 ⁹ The Ninth Circuit in *Holden* reiterated this problem with general partnerships owning
26 a fractional interest in a single investment: “In *Hocking* and *Koch* when investors withdrew
27 from the larger scheme or the current management arrangement changed, individual
28 investors were left with an investment—a single condominium unit in a hotel-like resort or a
general partnership in a small jojoba farm—which, absent the larger management scheme
of the pooling arrangement or plantation, was incapable of producing the profit investors
expected originally.” *Holden*, 978 F.2d at 1122. *See also Merchant Capital*, 483 F.3d at 764
 (“Thus, even if an individual partnership managed to replace [the manager], it would find that
its major assets were tied up in fractional share form in [the debt pool investment].”).

1 discrete parcel of land all to themselves. They, along with separate general partnerships,
2 own a fractional share of one. Schooler gave unambiguous deposition testimony on this
3 point:

4 Q: Do you generally sell the land to one partnership or
5 multiple partnerships or how does that work?

6 A: Depends on the size of the property. In the ones that are
7 very large then I have to sell them to multiple partnerships
8

9 Q: Do they own the entire property?

10 A: No, one-quarter of it.

11 Q: And how do you determine how many partnerships to
12 offer a piece of land to?

13 A: Depends on the size of the land. You know, some
14 properties are just not as big as others, and so maybe
15 two partnerships is enough or three partnerships is
16 enough. You want the partnerships not to exceed the
17 unwieldy, I think 5 million is the biggest one we've ever
18 done. Does that answer your question?

19 Q: I'm trying to figure out how you determine how many
20 partnerships to offer it to.

21 A: Right. It's between two and four just depending on the
22 size of the property.

23 (Kalin Decl., Ex. 1, Schooler Dep. at 134:12–136:21.) This seems to fall right into the lap of
24 *Koch*, as a general partnership arrangement in which the general partnership is truly
25 powerless with respect to the disposition of the asset in which it is invested. A majority in
26 interest within the general partnership may, for example, vote to sell, but that vote would be
27 meaningless absent a similar vote within the other general partnerships.

28 There is, of course, another side here. The Ninth Circuit in *Koch* was bothered by the
fact that there was no “formalized mechanism in the partnership agreements for attempting
to effect change on behalf of all thirty-five partnerships.” *Koch*, 928 F.2d at 1480. The
partnership agreement here, however, specifies that each general partnership will hold its
interest as a co-tenant, and that while any disposition of the “master parcel” will require the
mutual agreement of all co-tenants, any partner of any general partnership can contact a co-
tenant general partnership “to distribute information and/or initiate a ballot vote on matters

1 regarding the Master Parcel that are of consequence or importance to all Co-Tenants.” (Doc.
2 No. 14-1 at ¶¶ 6–6.3.2.) That, presumably, is precisely the kind of “formalized mechanism
3 . . . for attempting to effect change on behalf of all . . . partnerships” that the Ninth Circuit
4 found absent in *Koch*. Moreover, co-tenant general partnerships are expected to honor
5 communications from other co-tenant general partnerships as if they came from within their
6 own. (*Id.* at ¶ 6.3.3.). The Court is still dubious that the co-tenancy relationship between the
7 general partnerships invested in a single parcel of land saves Defendants here, especially
8 if it returns to the first principle that substance matters more than form, and that the emphasis
9 must be placed on economic realities. All signs are that with respect to the core
10 investment—the piece of land or so-called “master parcel”—the general partners truly are
11 dependant on Schooler and Western’s managerial abilities and unable to replace him or
12 exercise meaningful powers—at least with respect to the inter-partnership dealings that are
13 central to the ultimate disposition of their asset. So, this is one argument the Court believes
14 the SEC should have made more forcefully.¹⁰

15 Where does all of this leave the Court? The question is whether the SEC has made
16 out a prima facie case, on the third *Williamson* factor, that the general partnership interests
17 at issue are securities. The Court finds it has. Defendants’ likely involvement in selling the
18 parcel of land in which the general partnerships are invested, its pivotal operational role with
19 respect to the general partnerships, the fractional nature of the general partnerships’ interest
20 in the land, and the apparent use of investors IRA funds, *taken as whole*, satisfy the Court

21
22 ¹⁰ There is also another, which the Court hesitates to raise because neither party has
23 addressed it. The court in *Merchant Capital* noted that “investors invested through their IRA
24 accounts” and that “Merchant had represented to the IRA administrator that the interests
25 were limited liability partnership interests.” *Merchant Capital*, 483 F.3d at 752, 752 n.4. It
26 then recognized, “IRA funds may not be self-directed into general partnership interests.” *Id.*
27 But Defendants appear to be doing that. One promotional material represented, “We Make
28 it Possible to Use *IRA Funds*.” (Kalin Decl., Ex. 11 at 159.) An investor said in a declaration,
“I spoke with [Defendants’ sales person] over the phone and explained to him that I had
recently changed jobs and was looking to roll the approximately \$185,000 I had held in my
previous employer’s retirement fund, into an IRA.” (Levoy Decl. ¶ 4.) Defendants may have
a ready response to this, grounded in some technical understanding of the accounting or tax
rules that is more developed than the Court’s, but this is certainly something worth
considering further. There is cause for suspicion if Defendants are characterizing the general
partnership interests as something else in order to recruit investors’ IRA funds, but then
calling the investments just that to avoid the securities laws.

1 that the SEC has made a prima facie case that the general partnership interests at stake are
2 securities. The Court is especially persuaded by the fractional nature of the interests. Of the
3 four factors just mentioned, that one is doing the most work in the Court's conclusion,
4 considering the clear holding in *Koch*.

5 **III. Conclusion**

6 A preliminary injunction is appropriate if there is a prima facie case that Defendants
7 have violated the securities laws and a reasonable likelihood that their violations will be
8 repeated. The Court has just concluded that a prima facie case has been made. That's the
9 SEC's biggest hurdle. From there, almost everything else falls into place. There is little
10 doubt that, as of this case being filed, Defendants' activities were ongoing—and indeed,
11 substantial funds remain in many general partnerships. (See Kalin Decl. ¶ 28; Hebrank Decl.
12 ¶¶ 4–5.) The Court therefore converts the pending TRO into a preliminary injunction.

13 The SEC must meet and confer with Defendants' counsel and submit a proposed
14 preliminary injunction order to chambers within five days of the date this Order is entered.
15 (Obviously, it will be very similar if not virtually identical to the TRO now in place.) If there
16 are disagreements among the parties as to the contents of the order, the SEC should submit
17 a proposed order to chambers while filing in the case docket a joint statement in which the
18 parties' respective positions on disputed contents are explained.¹¹

19 **IV. Asset Freeze**

20 Defendants have independently challenged the legitimacy of an asset freeze in this
21 case, and the Court must address that issue.

22 The SEC originally argued that it “need only establish the mere possibility that assets
23 may be dissipated” and that “[i]t is unnecessary for the Court to find that dissipation of funds
24 is likely.” (Doc. No. 3-1 at 21.) It relied on *FSLIC v. Sahni*, in which the Ninth Circuit did hold
25 that where a plaintiff seeks a preliminary injunction and has shown a likelihood of success

26
27 ¹¹ With respect to notifying the general partners of this action, which has been a
28 substantial concern of Defendants from the beginning, the Court is willing to approve the
receiver notifying them that the general partnerships have been placed into a court-ordered
receivership on a preliminary finding that their interests are unregistered securities.

1 on the merits, “a possibility of dissipation of assets” is enough to support a freeze. 868 F.2d
2 1096. The Ninth Circuit overruled itself, however, in the wake of *Winter*, holding that “[a]
3 party seeking an asset freeze must show a likelihood of dissipation of the claimed assets,
4 or other inability to recover monetary damages, if relief is not granted.” *Johnson v. Couturier*,
5 572 F.3d 1067, 1085 (9th Cir. 2009). It explained that while *Sahni* rejected that standard,
6 “because *Winter* requires a likelihood of irreparable harm, this aspect of the *Sahni* decision
7 is overruled.”

8 The SEC’s fallback position is that *Sahni* has only been overruled to the extent it
9 applies to private parties. (Doc. No. 23.) Indeed, the Court has determined that the *Winter*
10 standard doesn’t apply to preliminary injunctions sought by the SEC, so it may follow that
11 neither does *Winter* inform the standard for an asset freeze sought by the SEC. There are
12 two problems with the SEC’s argument. First, the party seeking relief in *Sahni* was the
13 Federal Savings and Loan Insurance Corporation, a predecessor to the Federal Deposit
14 Insurance Corporation. If the Ninth Circuit in *Johnson*, which involved private parties,
15 intended for there to be two asset freeze standards, it needn’t have overruled *Sahni* at all.
16 But it did overrule *Sahni*, and that means it overruled a “possibility of dissipation” standard
17 in a case in which the party seeking the freeze was a servant of the public interest. Second,
18 at least two district courts, following *Winter*, have applied the *Johnson* asset freeze standard
19 to the Federal Trade Commission, a statutory guardian of the public interest analogous to
20 the SEC. See *FTC v. Millennium Telecard Inc.*, 2011 WL 2745963 at *11 (D.N.J. 2011); *FTC*
21 *v. John Beck Amazing Profits, LLC*, 2009 WL 7844076 at *15 (C.D. Cal. 2009). The Court
22 therefore can’t accept the SEC’s argument that it need only demonstrate a possibility that
23 Defendants will dissipate assets in order to justify an asset freeze. *Johnson* controls.

24 Has the SEC shown, then, that Defendants are likely to dissipate their own assets,
25 along with those of the general partnerships? In its original brief, it doesn’t try to make that
26 showing. (See Doc. No. 3-1 at 21–22.) It did file a supplemental pleading, though, in which
27 it argued that the evidence it has submitted does satisfy a “likelihood” standard. (Doc. No.
28 23.) But here is what that evidence reduces to: Beverly Schuler and Alice Jacobson, both

1 Western employees, are secretaries for the general partnerships and have signature
2 authority for their bank accounts, and Schooler has been using Western's funds "to pay hush
3 money to complaining investors." (*Id.* at 2.) As Defendants' counsel suggested at the
4 preliminary injunction hearing, this is some spin in this. That "hush money" went to an
5 investor who wasn't satisfied with his investment. (See Kalin Decl., Ex. 4, de Bock Dep. at
6 88:23–92:4.) There is a "hush" subtext to the partial reimbursement—the request came with
7 a threat to disclose and the partial reimbursement came with a nondisclosure
8 agreement—but the less cynical interpretation is simply that Defendants gave an unsatisfied
9 customer some of his money back. And it certainly doesn't make great sense to freeze
10 Defendants' assets so they can't do that.

11 The point of an asset freeze is to prevent their dissipation and waste so they will be
12 available for disgorgement. *SEC v. Hickey*, 322 F.3d 1123, 1132 (9th Cir. 2003); *Rafkind v.*
13 *Chase Manhattan Bank*, 1992 WL 380291 at *1 (S.D.N.Y. Dec. 7, 1992). The Court is
14 hesitant to find that threat in this case for several reasons. First, the Court has explicitly
15 avoided staking its preliminary injunction on the SEC's allegations of fraud, and it is really
16 where fraud is found that an asset freeze has the most traction. See, e.g., *Fidelity Nat. Title*
17 *Ins. Co. v. Castle*, 2011 WL 5882878 at *6 (N.D. Cal. Nov. 23, 2011). All the Court has found
18 here, by contrast, is that the SEC has made out a prima facie case that the general
19 partnership interests Western sells are securities. Second, the SEC has offered no evidence
20 that Defendants are sheltering or hiding money, or shuffling it around nefariously, and the
21 SEC has been openly monitoring them for over a year. See *John Beck Amazing Profits*,
22 2009 WL 7844076 at *15 (denying an asset freeze for lack of evidence that defendants "have
23 ever previously attempted to intentionally dissipate, hide or otherwise shelter corporate or
24 personal assets from an effort to collect a debt or judgment"). Third, the SEC's best
25 evidence is a single example of Defendants returning money to a dissatisfied investor.¹²

26
27 ¹² The SEC has since argued that Schooler delayed in filing an accounting of his
28 assets, as ordered by the TRO, by September 11, 2012. (Doc. No. 40 at 3.) While true that
courts may freeze assets where a defendant has "refused to disclose asset information in
defiance of a court order," the asset information has now been filed with the Court—and the
SEC hasn't identified any plain inadequacies in the information. See *Millennium Telecard*,

1 (See Doc. No. 23 at 2; Doc. No. 40 at 3.) Even if this was “hush money” as alleged, it still
2 went to a recipient with a rightful claim to it. See *Millennium Telecard*, 2011 WL 2745963 at
3 *13 (finding that proofs of financial impropriety “do not, as a general matter, rise to the level
4 of those instances where courts have found a likelihood of dissipation of assets”). Fourth,
5 the SEC’s request for an asset freeze hangs too heavily on the mere fact that Western
6 employees control the general partnerships’ bank accounts. (*Id.*) It is close to complete
7 speculation that, contrary to the interests of the general partnerships and unbeknownst to
8 them, they will receive and obey a command from Schooler to put their money out of reach.
9 And fifth, Defendants have already suffered a TRO and the public scrutiny and
10 embarrassment that come with an SEC lawsuit. The Court can’t imagine that this isn’t an
11 additional deterrent to the dissipation of investors’ money.

12 In spite of the above, Defendants are willing to stipulate to a continued freeze of the
13 assets of the general partnerships, overseen by the appointed receiver. They are also willing
14 to consent to Schooler’s and Western’s own assets, which are now frozen, being monitored
15 to address the SEC’s concerns about money that has passed straight from the general
16 partnerships to Western. This seems reasonable to the Court, especially in light of its
17 conclusion that the SEC’s argument for any kind of asset freeze is tenuous to begin with.
18 The Court will take guidance from *Millennium Telecard*, and direct the receiver to meet and
19 confer with the parties and submit a proposal by which he will remain receiver of the general
20 partnerships but transition into a monitor role with respect to Defendants’ assets. The freeze
21 and receivership of Defendants’ assets will not be lifted until the Court approves the

22 //

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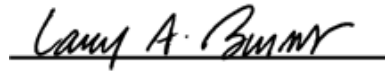
26 _____
27 2011 WL 2745963 at *11; Doc. Nos. 36–37. Also, at the risk of being too charitable to
28 Defendants, at the preliminary injunction hearing the Court encouraged the parties to see a
Magistrate Judge and attempt to reach a settlement, and this may have given Defendants
the impression—albeit mistaken—that the Court’s TRO was not to be taken seriously in its
entirety, or immediately.

1 receiver's proposal. The Court would ask that the receiver submit this proposal within two
2 weeks of the date this Order is entered.

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IT IS SO ORDERED.

DATED: October 5, 2012



HONORABLE LARRY ALAN BURNS
United States District Judge