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PLOTS & PLOYS

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Land Grab

About one year ago, Taylor Grant, a judicial receiver in California, thought he faced mission impossible: selling 970 land lots taken from distressed builder WL Homes and put into receivership by the lender. Most of the land was in California and Arizona, two of the states hardest-hit by the housing bust.

"Were the lots even sellable?" Mr. Grant recalls wondering.

But, much to his surprise, there was tremendous interest—and competition—from groups betting housing's recovery is within reach. The land is now sold: The total package commanded about \$90 million from 13 different companies. Builder PulteGroup Inc. was the biggest buyer, he said, spending \$25 million for 168 lots in California's Bay Area.

To be sure, most of the prices were at significant discounts to what they would have commanded at the peak, and some lots went for "almost nothing," Mr. Grant says. "History will tell us if they stole the land or overpaid," he adds. "Chapter Two to follow."

—Dawn Wotapka