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**HEADLINE:** FINANCIER'S TRIAL DATE SET

**BYLINE:** STAFF REPORT

**BODY:**

Arnold Strom Jr., the Punta Gorda financier who is accused of operating numerous schemes to defraud investors, home buyers and financial institutions, is scheduled for trial Sept. 1.

Strom is facing trial on charges of defrauding investors and home buyers through various schemes. He is charged with one count of racketeering and four counts of grand theft.

The non-jury trial before Judge Jack R. Schoonover, a retired appellate judge, may continue all month. During a pretrial conference Tuesday, the judge said he will allow each side two hours for opening statements.

The \$ 3 million business Strom had operated in Punta Gorda for a decade collapsed under the weight of dozens of foreclosures.

Prosecutors contend that Strom engaged in a "classic Ponzi scheme" in which he posed as a financial savior to people who needed homes, selling properties saddled with hidden debt through a group of companies he controlled.

Statewide prosecutor Brian Pugh said Tuesday that he plans to present evidence during the September trial that Strom defrauded about 13 home buyers and four individual investors and attempted unsuccessfully to defraud 14 financial institutions, including banks and mortgage companies, of about \$ 1. 5 million. Pugh said the money taken from individual investors was generally in the five-figure range, except for one man who lost his \$ 600,000 investment.

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