

Owners of complex, Orkin settle lawsuit

■ Coachman Crossing Apartments alleged, among other things, that the company had faked termite treatments.

By GRAHAM BRINK
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TAMPA — A civil trial involving the Orkin pest control company and the owners of an apartment complex in Clearwater ended abruptly Friday afternoon when the two sides reached a confidential settlement.

The owners of the Coachman Crossing Apartments sued Orkin, claiming the company faked termite treatments and neglected to fully disclose the apartment's termite problem. The owners had asked for \$6.7-million, the amount they say the complex's value had decreased because of the damage.

The trial, which was scheduled to last the rest of the month, began earlier this week with jury selection. The lawyers made opening statements on Thursday.

A boost for the owners of the complex was Hillsborough Circuit Judge Claudia Isom's decision before the trial to allow evidence from Orkin employees who said the company had a history of deceiving their customers and falsifying work orders.

Some observers believed the case could indicate how similar

cases filed against Orkin around the Southeast would turn out. Orkin faces a possible class action case in which as many as 100,000 Florida homeowners could gain the right to file claims against the extermination company.

In the Coachman Crossing case, Peter Cardillo, attorney for the apartment complex, said Thursday that current and past Orkin employees would testify they were told to forge customers' signatures to receive bonuses. One employee forged about 300 signatures during one sitting, he said.

Daniel J. Gerber, Orkin's attorney, said in court that managers at Coachman Crossing Apartments didn't listen when Orkin repeatedly told them to remove mulch around their complex and shorten wooden panels that touched the ground to help get rid of termites. He said wood in the apartment buildings had absorbed water, creating conditions in which termites thrive.

"There is no fraud at all with respect to Coachman Crossing," Gerber said Thursday. "There is no intent to deceive in this case."

The settlement agreement prohibits the two sides from disclosing the terms of the deal.

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