

Rural builder sees rapid growth in WA

By **MEL WILLIAMS**

WHEN Julian Walter started in the building industry in 1976, Perth's population was 846,000.

Since then, he has witnessed the urban sprawl that has come, with a population growth to 2.118 million people and seen the city earn the dubious honour of being the longest city in the world – spanning 150 kilometres from Two Rocks to Dawesville.

Starting his own company after only seven years as a brick

seller with Calsil-Besser and assistant marketing director with Plunkett Homes was a big move for the then 28-year-old.

As a co-founder of J-Corp, he oversaw the growth of the company into a diversified housing group with 19 separate operating divisions.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of running his company, which he re-branded as JWH Group.

"I had more of a marketing and accounting background than a housing

background, but this served me well when I started J-Corp and needed to set its future direction," Mr Walter said.

He said that direction included founding WA's biggest regional building company – WA Country Builders and the Rural Building Company.

Oswald Homes, which has been in WA for 50 years, also came into his portfolio.

Plunkett Homes was then incorporated to JWH Group after 18 years of negotiations with the previous owners.

It is celebrating 150 years in business this year.

Mr Walter said the building industry was very rewarding, as you were dealing mostly with people who were spending their life savings and wanted a very high level of service and were happy with the end result.

He said in his early years operating J-Corp they were building up to 2000 homes a year.

"Demand was huge



□ This year marks the 40th anniversary of Julian Walter (centre) running his own company, JWH Group.

and we had a reputation for doing an excellent job," he said.

"We were building homes right across Perth and in the regions – from Esperance up to Kalbarri.

"We also built in the Northern Territory for a few years."

Mr Walter said the early housing scene in Perth involved builders buying land and putting up "spec" homes that would then be offered to buyers.

"Then the industry moved to building display homes for people to inspect before deciding what to build

on their farm or holiday block in the regions – and in Perth," he said.

"The next step was building homes to order and using the services of architects more.

"Today, the industry has evolved to offering complete packages – from design and finance right through to the build and even the interior finishing touches."

Mr Walter said when he was starting out, people would access their own finance and builders would liaise with lenders, with a

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□ As a co-founder of J-Corp in the 1970s, Julian Walter has now overseen growth of his company into a diversified housing group with 19 separate operating divisions.

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procurement fee paid.

Terminating building societies and then permanent building societies were then born.

Mr Walter said his company had a close affiliation with Home Building Society in the early years and house building became more of a package deal for clients.

He said farmers and other regional residents who were building could get the same services as those in Perth and his aim was for them to not have to wait to get anything built.

In the early days of the company, Mr Walter said there was not a lot of first home buyer activity in regional areas.

"So we offered packages on a dollars per week basis as a way to get them in to the market," he said.

"When we arrived in Geraldton, we were threatened to be run out of town by local builders.

"But it soon became clear that we would increase overall demand for new housing and get them more work."

Today things have gone full-circle and there is a clear trend of investor or build-to-rent.

"Many farmers are investing in rental properties like never before," Mr Walter said.

He said the biggest breakthrough in the regions was the level of sophistication that now came with the build.

"People can get what they want and – usually

– get it built faster," he said.

"People are also moving from the city to the regions and want a quality house built, often as a place where they can work from home using high speed computing and phone services.

"It is interesting that staff working regionally are using services such as Starlink, which are faster than services available in the city.

"People are going to areas that have medical facilities and all the key amenities they would get in Perth."

Mr Walter said the building sector faced challenges, including still getting through the recent boom.

"Logistics were hit in a big way after

COVID lockdowns and the industry is still recovering," he said.

"We couldn't get labourers or materials and things like a shortage of timber due to strong demand in the United States and high steel prices have held us up.

"It has been a perfect storm.

"So, we need to get back into sequence.

"We are ordering materials three months in advance, but if there are a few slipped cogs in the wheel, it is difficult to finish projects in a timely manner."

Mr Walter is slowly transitioning out of the business and leaving it to his children Jay and Alicia to run.

The siblings have worked in the business for many years.